

# THE MUNICH CONSPIRACY

by

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## PREFACE

**H**ARDLY anyone under the age of thirty-five, when these lines are being written, can have any personal recollection of the terrifying events which are nowadays grouped together under the general description of "Munich". For most it has become a matter for the history-books, or perhaps for the political articles in newspapers, a self-explanatory phrase not requiring further argument. Yet it does.

For months in 1938 and 1939 it was a question which divided friends, families, parties, nations, especially in Britain and France. That was not surprising. It was at the behest of the Governments of those two countries, as well as under threat of armed force by the Nazi Government of Germany, that an astonishing thing happened in September, 1938, to one of the most prosperous, democratic and progressive States in Europe. Within less than three weeks, against the express wish of its Government, amid the lamentations of its people, contrary to the declared will of its powerful army, the Czechoslovak Republic was dismembered without a war, and lost its democracy without a counter-revolution.

The controversy passed from the newspapers and the meetings into the world of books—memoirs, histories, collections of documents. At first it was the turn of angry exposures, to rouse the peoples against the Governments responsible for Munich. By the summer of 1939 a number of such indictments had appeared. Even during the second world war, the flow continued, though less abundantly. Before the war ended, however, something like the situation which had produced Munich seemed to be looming ahead: and in 1944 began the counter-stream of apologetics, which was taken up and expanded during the first five or six years after the war. British apologists for Munich, in the main, threw the blame on the French: French apologists on the British. Actions which in British politicians were half-excused as due to their narrow-minded, ignorant, but sincere hatred of war, were indignantly condemned as double-dealing, treachery and cowardice when committed by Frenchmen. French writers found little to commend except realism in their own statesmen, and plenty of hypocrisy and "sacred egoism"—devotion to the interests of Albion, to which everyone else must conform—in the behaviour of their British counterparts. Official collections of diplomatic documents, personal memoirs



embodying others, began to appear in the late 1940s, which turned out to be omitting vital particulars—when they did not do worse. Some of the apologists thought the U.S.S.R. in 1938 wanted to save peace, but was powerless to act: others that its main aim, on the contrary, was to set the other countries by the ears, and get off scot-free itself.

A considerable literature has been built up in this way, and the reader will find many traces of it in the following pages. For what I have written above does not mean that an enormous amount of factual and useful material has not emerged from the controversy. The student of contemporary history always owes a debt of gratitude to those who have come before him, for their part in producing that material, even when he thinks that many of them have used it wrong-headedly, and for purposes which he condemns. That kind of dialectics has always existed in history-writing: but it inevitably applies most of all in contemporary history—for obvious reasons. And the history of Munich is still very much with us, even if Munich is not always mentioned, as maybe the reader will realise.

The writer, in one sense, "lived through" Munich: in a special way, in the press-room and lobbies of the League of Nations palace at Geneva, during 1938 and several years before that. With the press and the diplomats of all countries flowing into Geneva, and London, Paris, Berlin and Moscow at easy telephoning distance, the tragic events leading to Munich were so sharply delineated in convenient perspective, day by day, that it compensated to some degree for one's remoteness from the stages on which the drama was being acted. The first rough sketch of narrative taken up in this book, indeed, was made at that time, twenty years ago. Nor was there lack of drama of its own kind, from the angry discussions in League corridors and talks at the Hradschin Castle at Prague, with spokesmen of the main actors—and sometimes with the actors themselves—over the weeks and months of that black year, to the day when the very Liberal correspondent of a very Conservative newspaper, who had refused to credit what was going on, cried out to me: "I'm ashamed to be an Englishman!" To-day a vast compendium of documents is available, however, to supplement (if not to replace) the emotions of those months; and the twentieth anniversary of Munich seems a suitable time to try and bring them into motion.

In the first three chapters, forming Part One of this book, there is a preliminary outline of the general setting—Western relations with Germany before Hitler, the successive disputes with him and his allies after 1933, and some essential facts about Czechoslovakia. Part Two

deals with the role in 1938 of the Powers directly involved—Germany, Britain, France, Czechoslovakia (with a note on the U.S.A.) and the U.S.S.R., a chapter on each. The titles of the other four chapters in this section are self-explanatory. Part Three suggests, in the light of all the evidence, an explanation of Munich (Chapter XIII), and the main immediate consequences for the countries concerned (Chapter XIV).

The purpose of this book, therefore, is to examine the conditions in which the Munich agreement was effected, and more particularly the actions of the Powers principally concerned. Its aim is to discover, if possible, what principles actually prompted the settlement of Munich. The book seeks light on this question, not only as a piece of historical research, but also to illuminate to some small degree the problems of world peace which were involved, and which still remain.

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ANDREW ROTHSTEIN

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# PART ONE

## BACKGROUND TO MUNICH

### CHAPTER I

#### BEFORE HITLER

AT the end of 1918 the German Empire and its allies, defeated in the great war to redivide the world which they had been waging for more than four years, lay prostrate at the feet of the other coalition led by Great Britain, France and the United States. The Slav peoples oppressed for centuries in Austria-Hungary were tearing that Empire apart, setting up new States of their own. In Germany great mutinies in the armed forces, mass strikes and workers' demonstrations, the setting up of workers' and soldiers' councils marked the end of the Imperial régime,<sup>1</sup> and similar events were taking place in Vienna and Budapest. It seemed that the end of Prussian militarism, the menace of which for years had been the constant theme of writers on international politics, had come at last.

But the first world war had brought something else. In 1917, after the Russian Tsarist Empire had suffered a series of heavy defeats at the hands of the Germans and its economy had been completely exhausted and disorganised, the Russian working class had also risen in revolt, supported by the soldiers and the mass of the peasantry. In March, beginning at the nerve-centre of the Empire, Petrograd, it overthrew the Tsar and established workers' and soldiers' councils (Soviets) in the towns, while the peasants set up their own Soviets in the country. In November, now under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party in the principal industrial centres and on the principal war fronts, the workers, sailors and soldiers overthrew the Provisional Government formed by pro-capitalist parties to replace the Tsar, and set up the Soviet Republic, with the aim of building a Socialist State of society.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There are, of course, many accounts of this upheaval. One that cannot be accused of sympathy with revolutionaries may be mentioned—the *Memoirs* of Prince Max of Baden (English edition, 1928), vol. II.

<sup>2</sup> M. Philips Price, *My Reminiscences of the Russian Revolution* (1921), and John Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1919, 1926 and later), give a documented picture of this period.

For over a year now the British, French, American and other Governments of the States now supreme in Western and Central Europe had been waging a war on the Soviet Republic—first by subsidising counter-revolutionary rebel leaders: then by directly organising various acts of invasion.<sup>3</sup> It was natural that they should be greatly alarmed lest events in Germany should proceed in the same direction as in Russia: for in other European countries conditions were also very disturbed. Accordingly, while laying down the most stringent terms of surrender for Germany with the one hand, the Allied rulers began at the same time modifying these terms of surrender for political reasons with the other.

"I pointed out the danger of bringing about a state of Bolshevism in Germany if the terms of the armistice were made too stiff, and the consequent danger to England, France and Italy", wrote President Wilson's personal representative, Col. House, of a talk with Lloyd George and Clemenceau on October 30, 1918. The first agreed there was danger in England, the second denied there was any in France, but both agreed that "anything might happen in Italy".<sup>4</sup> In fact, the German delegates who met Marshal Foch to negotiate the armistice pleaded on November 19 to be allowed to retain the rifles and over 30,000 machine guns of the former German army, because "Germany is on the verge of Bolshevism" and it was "necessary for them to form an army to oppose Bolshevism and re-establish order".<sup>5</sup> Moreover, article 12 of the armistice which they signed on November 11 provided that German troops in territories which before the war had formed part of Russia, unlike the German armies in Western Europe, should be withdrawn only "as soon as the Allies shall think the moment suitable, having regard to the internal situation of these territories": and article 16 gave the Allies free access to the territories when they were evacuated, either through Danzig or by the Vistula, "for the purpose of maintaining order". A similar provision was made at the time for Austro-Hungarian, Rumanian and Turkish territories. But by the time the Versailles Peace Treaty was signed, on June 28, 1919, these had been evacuated; and it was only in the regions directly convenient for the war on Soviet Russia that German troops were ordered to remain until the Allied Governments told them to go—"in order

<sup>3</sup> Philips Price (*op. cit.*) gives an account of these operations as one present in Russia at the time. W. P. and Z. Coates, *Armed Intervention in Russia* (1935), draw on *Hansard*, the British press and Government publications.

<sup>4</sup> *Intimate Papers of Colonel House* (1928), vol. IV, p. 121.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141, and D. Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. II, ch. LXXXV.

to ensure the restoration of peace and good government in the Baltic provinces and Lithuania".<sup>6</sup>

Thus from the first there was a duality and a contradiction in the policy of the Western Powers after 1918. On the one hand, they wanted to eliminate the danger to themselves from German militarism, which had developed through three Prussian wars—against Denmark (1864), Austria (1866) and France (1871)—into the Hohenzollern Empire of 1871-1918, equipped with all the means of modern warfare by an alliance of the landowners, big banks and industrial monopolies. On the other hand, by keeping a section of the Kaiser's army for use against Soviet Russia, and by encouraging the building up of the most reactionary fragments of the rest into a new army expressly for the purpose of stamping out working-class revolution in Germany,<sup>7</sup> the Allies were placing at the disposal of those very same classes the reliable nucleus of a revived militarism, which could expand as and when circumstances permitted. In fact, as was recognised in later years, the Allied Governments for the same reasons turned a blind eye at the "secret" rearmament of Germany beyond the limits fixed by the Versailles Treaty—by building artillery, planes, a skeleton General Staff, and above all by organising secret military formations under various disguises (the "Black Reichswehr").<sup>8</sup>

Nor should it be supposed that this happened by accident, or that the Allied Governments were not aware of the implications. One may quote here one of their keenest critics and one of their most important officials: a Liberal critic, because he had been the British Treasury's representative at the Peace Conference of 1919 up to the eve of the signature of the Treaty, and his analysis was both well-informed and prophetic: and a high Tory official, because, as Britain's Ambassador in Germany from 1920 to 1926, he was known as the "uncrowned King of Germany" during the first years after Versailles, and it was his policy, not the critic's, which was accepted.

<sup>6</sup> Article 433 of the Treaty of Versailles.

<sup>7</sup> The new units were composed in the main of ex-officers, ex-N.C.Os. and the most politically immature soldiers of the old Imperial Army. A compact account of how they operated can be found in M. Philips Price, *Germany in Transition* (1923), chapters II-VI; or in contemporary German novels like Ludwig Renn's *After the War*.

<sup>8</sup> A useful summary of this process was published in 1942 by the late Sir Geoffrey Knox in his *The Last Peace and the Next*. As a British Embassy official at Berlin in 1924-6, and as President of the International Governing Commission in the Saarland in 1932-5, Knox had many opportunities to see the "secret" rearmament in progress; and, as Sir Walter (afterwards Lord) Layton pointed out in 1944 (*How to Deal with Germany*, p. 37), "the politicians were frankly warned by the Allied Commissioners that evasion was taking place". A British Cabinet Minister had a list of sums spent for this purpose from 1920 to 1933 (*Ambassador Dodd's Diary*, January 31, 1936). See also Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. I (1948), pp. 36-7, and J. H. Morgan, *Assized Arms* (Methuen, 1945).



Mr. J. M. Keynes (later Lord Keynes) wrote in November, 1919: "The same conflict of purpose is apparent in the attitude of the Council of the Allies at Paris towards the present Government of Germany. A victory of Spartacism in Germany might well be the prelude to revolution everywhere; it would renew the forces of Bolshevism in Russia, and precipitate the dreaded union of Germany and Russia. . . . Therefore Paris does not love Spartacus. But on the other hand a victory of reaction in Germany would be regarded by everyone as a threat to the security of Europe, and as endangering the fruits of victory and the basis of the Peace. Besides, a new military power establishing itself in the East, with its spiritual home in Brandenburg, drawing to itself all the military talent and all the military adventurers, all those who regret emperors and hate democracy, in the whole of Eastern and Central and South-Eastern Europe, a power which would be geographically inaccessible to the military forces of the Allies, might well found—at least in the anticipation of the timid—a new Napoleonic domination, rising as a phoenix from the ashes of cosmopolitan militarism. So Paris dare not love Brandenburg."<sup>9</sup>

But Paris did decide in favour of "Brandenburg"—even though, for a number of years, the latter put on the disguise of a Republic, in which Social-Democratic, Liberal or Catholic governments ruled with the help of the new armed forces. Here is the testimony of Lord D'Abernon, writing in his diary on November 23, 1920: "Without in any way abandoning the demand for the surrender of rifles and small-arms, I should advise a somewhat less energetic and categorical attitude than in regard to the larger material. I should fear to disarm the orderly sections of the people, leaving arms in the hands of the extreme Socialists and the Spartacists. Regarding the Einwohnerwehr and Orgesch organisations" (two of the illegal military formations) "it is difficult to decide whether these make for order or for future trouble. They are at bottom monarchical and military, although they deny it. But I consider the danger from the Left far exceeds the danger from the Right, and in the event of a new outbreak of Communism in Germany, it can be regarded as certain that these organisations would powerfully serve the cause of order."<sup>10</sup>

With the help of the Allied Governments, therefore, the Right got the upper hand in Germany, and capitalism was settled back more

<sup>9</sup> *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (December, 1919), pp. 271-2. "Spartacism" was the title by which the German Communist movement was known at first. "Brandenburg"—original domain of the later Prussian kings—stood for German reaction.

<sup>10</sup> *Diary* ("An Ambassador of Peace"), vol. I (1929), p. 92.

firmly in the saddle. The course of events in the following years, however, was by no means a simple one. It was particularly complicated at first by the insistence of the victor Powers on payment of practically unlimited reparations by Germany. The German ruling classes were not prepared to accept this price for their rescue in 1918-20, and strove to evade the demands presented to them.

In the spring of 1922 this situation, coupled with the continuing hostility of the victorious Powers to Soviet Russia, led to a serious reverse for them. Partly driven by their own internal political and economic difficulties which had already, a year before, led Britain to sign a Trade Agreement with Russia, but inspired also by the hope that famine conditions over a great part of eastern Russia since the previous summer would now force the Soviet Government to its knees, the Allied Powers called an international economic conference at Genoa in April. In anticipation of the conference, the British Government promoted discussions of a "European Consortium" to take over the work of capital investment and "reconstruction" in Russia on capitalist lines. The French Government confined itself to securing a conference of Allied economic and financial experts, which met in London and worked out the terms of capitulation to be presented to the Soviet delegation. The Germans would gladly have taken part in the proposed "Consortium", but never got the chance. When the Genoa Conference opened on April 10, it speedily became clear that (i) the Soviet Government was ready for extensive co-operation with the capitalist countries, including the granting of far-reaching concessions on its territory; (ii) the Allied Powers demanded nothing less than the restoration of the capitalist property system in Russia and of foreign control over its finances, extra-territorial rights for foreigners, etc.; (iii) at the same time they would not make the slightest concession to the Germans in the matter of reparations; (iv) the Soviet Government would not hear of any such surrenders as the Allies were demanding, although it was willing to compromise on compensation for pre-war foreign owners if it got credits to rebuild the shattered economy of Russia.

After much hesitation, the German Government decided to accept the Soviet offer of a treaty which restored normal diplomatic relations, cancelled mutual claims (except that Germany would receive no less favourable terms than any other country later signing an agreement with Russia) and ensured German Government support for private firms doing business with Russia. The treaty was signed at Rapallo on April 16, 1922, thus breaking the attempted capitalist front against



Soviet Russia. It was a reminder that German capitalism had its own national aims, which did not necessarily coincide with those of its conquerors, even though they had helped it to crush its own working class. Rapallo was also a reminder that, although the Soviet Government had no special love for the German capitalists, it had no special respect for the balance of forces in the capitalist world established by the Versailles Treaty: and would deal in a friendly way with those who showed a friendly attitude, giving tit for tat to those who treated it as an enemy.<sup>11</sup>

However, the reparations burden continued to fall on Germany—and the German ruling classes naturally passed it on to the workers. This led to a series of convulsions, involving occupation of the Ruhr coalfield by French and Belgian troops in January, 1923, against the wishes of the British Government; and a tremendous financial and political crisis, with a big growth in the influence of the Communist Party and armed repression by the German Government, later in the year. Finally, in 1924, the Allies signed an agreement (the Dawes Plan) with Germany, reducing and regularising reparations payments and opening the door wide for foreign (particularly American) capital to buy shares in German industry, banking and commerce.

German capitalism was now stabilised, with powerful supporters abroad. That fact, together with the continuing growth of its armaments, emboldened it to begin pressing for its place in the sun once more. In the autumn of 1924 it asked for admission to the League of Nations, founded by the victorious Powers after the war.<sup>12</sup> Then it suggested a joint guarantee by itself, France, Britain and Italy of the Rhine frontier, including the demilitarised zone established in German territory on both sides of the Rhine (all territory on the left bank and a 50-kilometre strip on the right) by articles 42 and 43 of the Versailles Treaty.<sup>13</sup> This zone had originally been imposed on Germany in order to make it easier for the Allies to coerce her if she violated the Treaty. A new voluntary arrangement of the kind proposed—at a time when she was becoming economically and militarily stronger than in 1919, while cleavages had begun to appear between Britain and France—could mean that she might even be defended *against* France, should the

<sup>11</sup> The fullest account of Rapallo is in Russian, *Istoria Diplomatii*, vol. III (1945), ch. 6, supplemented in some details by N. L. Rubinstein, *Vneshniaya Politika Sovetskogo Gosudarstva v 1921–1925 godakh* (1953), ch. 8. In English, see Fischer, *The Soviets in World Affairs*, vol. I (1930), pp. 326–44.

<sup>12</sup> Note of Foreign Minister Stresemann to the ten Powers, members of the League Council, September 29, 1924.

<sup>13</sup> Stresemann's Note of January 20, 1925, to the British Government, suggested to him, according to his *Papers* (vol. II, pp. 14–15), by D'Abernon himself.

latter take unilateral action like the march into the Ruhr, two years before.

There is no lack of hints in Lord D'Abernon's diaries at the time, as well as in the talks and writings of Stresemann (to make such an arrangement more acceptable) that the agreement would strengthen Germany as a "bulwark against Bolshevism". But the price which Germany demanded was that there should be no collective guarantees for the frontiers of any of the East European States bordering on Germany—particularly Poland, Czechoslovakia and Austria. At first the French Government, which was interested in preventing German domination of these countries, attempted to resist: but under pressure from Great Britain, after months of bargaining, it had to yield, because the British Government supported the German attitude in this.<sup>14</sup> Moreover the British Government was reinforced by the United States, whose Ambassador in London publicly declared, at a Pilgrims dinner, and in the presence of Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister, that American financial aid would only be provided to the European nations if they convinced the U.S.A. "that the time for destructive methods and policies has passed and that the time for peaceful up-building has begun".<sup>15</sup>

After months of negotiation, the Pact of Locarno was initialled on October 16, 1925 (it was signed on December 1). Germany, Belgium, France, the United Kingdom and Italy, collectively and severally, guaranteed the Rhine frontier and maintenance of the demilitarised zone. Germany, Belgium and France undertook not to attack or invade each other (except where action under the League Covenant was concerned, or if there were a breach of the Rhineland provisions), and Britain and Italy joined in this guarantee. By agreement between the signatories, the Treaty would be ratified when Germany joined the League. As action under the League Covenant involved obligations under its article 16—which provided for collective action against aggressors—Germany received a special letter assuring her that a State member of the League would only be bound by this "to an extent which is compatible with its military situation and takes its geographical position into account". Simultaneously, Poland and Czechoslovakia signed arbitration treaties with Germany, to cover "all disputes of every kind"; and they concluded treaties of mutual assistance with France, pledging in each case mutually to "immediately lend aid and

<sup>14</sup> F. P. Walters, *A History of the League of Nations* (1952), vol. I, pp. 284, 286, 288.

<sup>15</sup> Speech by Ambassador Alanson B. Houghton, May 4, 1925, reported in *The Times* next day.



assistance", should Germany break the peace or violate the Treaty, with "an unprovoked recourse to arms".<sup>16</sup>

What was the significance of the Locarno Pact, with its associated treaties? First, it closed the door to war in the West, to the best of the ability of its signatories. Secondly, it weakened the guarantee of security to Poland, Czechoslovakia and Austria provided by the League Covenant of 1919, in that Germany—already much stronger than in 1919—had refused to give them the same guarantee as to France and Belgium, and Great Britain (one of the chief authors of the Covenant) upheld her in this. Thirdly, it enabled Germany for the time being to balance between the U.S.S.R. and hostile States in the West,<sup>17</sup> since although she was to enter the League of Nations she was released in advance from the obligation to join in military action against the U.S.S.R. under article 16. But fourthly the way was left wide open for such hostile action, if she chose to take it in agreement with Poland, France, Britain and the other countries. Fifth, the weakening of France's ties with the States set up with her help, out of the wreck of the German, Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires, was imposed on France by Great Britain and the U.S.A.

British Ministers did not hesitate to underline the broad general purpose of the Locarno treaties. Before their signature Austen Chamberlain, the Foreign Secretary, had circulated a Cabinet memorandum that Russia was "the most menacing of our uncertainties, and it must be in spite of Russia, perhaps because of Russia, that a policy of security must be framed".<sup>18</sup> After the Locarno conference the Under-Secretary for the Colonies expressed the opinion of the British Government:<sup>19</sup> "The Pact has drawn together the Western Powers of Europe in defence of Western civilisation. . . . The solidarity of Western civilisation is necessary to stand against the most sinister force that has arisen, not only in our lifetime, but previously in European history. The issue at Locarno as I see it was: is Germany to regard her future as bound up with the fate of the great Western Powers, or is she going to work with Russia for the destruction of Western civilisation? The significance of Locarno is tremendous. It means that, so far as the

<sup>16</sup> *The Locarno Agreements*. Monthly Summary of the League of Nations, December, 1925.

<sup>17</sup> On April 24, 1926, Germany signed a treaty with the U.S.S.R. providing each party would remain neutral if the other were attacked by a third party, "in spite of its peaceful conduct".

<sup>18</sup> "Leaked" in the first instance to the Paris edition of the *Chicago Tribune* (March 6, 1925), its existence was not denied by Chamberlain (*Hansard*, May 11, 1925).

<sup>19</sup> Speech of Mr. W. C. A. Ormsby-Gore at Manchester, October 24, 1925 (reported in *The Times* of the 26th).

present Government of Germany is concerned, it is detached from Russia and is throwing in its lot with the Western party."

Thus the Locarno Pact represented a further strengthening of the international position of Germany. In the eyes of its authors Germany was once more a bulwark against the U.S.S.R. (a revenge for Rapallo, as it were). In reality, Germany was reinforced as against the smaller States of eastern and central Europe likewise, and therefore as against their particular ally France. In this way it carried a good deal further the process which began with the Armistice terms of November, 1918, and it prepared the way for more. "There was already something of the spirit of Munich in Locarno", wrote a French ex-Premier, Paul Reynaud, over twenty years later.<sup>20</sup>

But it was not until Hitler was put in power by the big monopolists in Germany in January, 1933,<sup>21</sup> on the crest of a wave of demagoguery and subsidised thuggery for which the opportunity was provided by the economic crisis from 1930 onwards, that the real meaning of Locarno was revealed.

<sup>20</sup> Reynaud, *La France a sauvé L'Europe* (1947), vol. I, p. 48.

<sup>21</sup> "He (William II) was only the creature of militarism, heavy industry and those East Elbian junkers with whom the Hohenzollerns had struck an early and enduring bargain. The same evil forces, particularly the first two, made that yet louder and swankier creature, Hitler" (*Lessons of My Life*, 1943, pp. 100-1). This was one of the occasions when Lord Vansittart talked sense, during the war.

## STEP BY STEP

HITLER had a programme when he came to power. It had been set forth most explicitly in his book, *Mein Kampf*, written long before, and circulated after 1933 in millions of copies—not only in German, but also in English and French. The following are the striking passages of this book in which the new ruler of Germany had warned the world of his policy:

"The size of a country has a further military significance, in addition to that which it has as the direct source of a people's food supply.

"Even if a people has secured a sufficient expanse of territory, it must nevertheless necessarily also consider how to make this available territory secure. This security is founded on the general political strength of the State, which in its turn is to no small degree determined by the factors of military geography.

"Thus only as a world Power will the German people be able to defend its future" (pp. 728-9).<sup>1</sup>

"Germany to-day is not a world Power. Even if our present military impotence were overcome, we should, nevertheless, have not the slightest claim to this title. What is the significance to-day of a country on this planet, the relation between population and territory of which is so pitiable as that of the German Reich? In an epoch in which the earth is gradually being divided between States, some of which comprise almost complete continents, it is impossible to speak of world power in connection with a country whose political territory is limited to the ridiculous area of scarcely 500,000 square kilometres" (p. 729).

"The National-Socialist movement must attempt to remove the disproportion between the number of our population and the size of our territory—the latter regarded as the source of our food supplies and also as the basis of our political power—between our historical past and the hopelessness of our impotence at the present time. It must be fully conscious in doing so that we, as the guardians of the highest

<sup>1</sup> The page references throughout are to the 1935 German edition, quoted from *Hitler Means War*, a most valuable booklet issued by the Anglo-Russian Parliamentary Committee in June, 1936.

forms of humanity on this earth, are bound by the highest obligations, and it will be able the better to fulfil this obligation the more it sees that the German people remember their race" (p. 732).

"Yes, all we can learn from the past is that our political activity must pursue a double aim: new soil as the aim of our foreign policy, and a new, ideologically firm and uniform foundation as the aim of our internal political activity. . . . The demand for a restoration of the boundaries of the year 1914 is political nonsense, so colossal and grave in its consequences that it appears criminal. Quite apart from the fact that the boundaries of the Reich in the year 1914 were anything but logical. For in reality they were neither complete, from the point of view of comprising all people of German nationality, nor rational from the point of view of military geographical utility. They were not the result of conscious political action, but temporary boundaries in a political struggle in no way terminated" (pp. 735-6).

"The boundaries of the year 1914 have not the slightest significance for the future of the German nation. They neither provided protection in the past, nor could they provide power in the future.

"The German people will neither obtain internal cohesion through them, nor will its food supply be guaranteed, nor are these boundaries effective or even adequate from the military point of view, nor, finally, can they improve our present relations with the other world Powers or, more correctly, with the real world Powers" (pp. 738-9).

"In contrast to this aim (the restoration of the 1914 frontiers) we National Socialists must steadfastly maintain our aim in foreign policy, namely, to secure for the German people the soil that is due to them on this earth. And this action is the only one that can justify a sacrifice of blood before God and our German posterity. . . .

"In this connection I must take a strong stand against those Nationalist scribblers who regard such an acquisition of territory as a 'violation of sacred human rights'. . . . A thoughtless imbecile may regard the division of the earth as fixed for all eternity, but in reality each temporary division is only an apparent point of rest in the current of development, created in constant change by the mighty forces of Nature, only perhaps to be destroyed and remodelled by stronger forces to-morrow—and the same is true in human history of the boundaries of national living spaces.

"Boundaries are made by men and altered by men" (pp. 739-40).

"The fact that a people succeeds in acquiring a disproportionate amount of territory does not imply the obligation for others eternally



to acquiesce in this fact. It proves at best the strength of the conquerors and the weakness of the sufferers. This strength alone in such cases determines what is right. . . .

"Just as our ancestors did not receive the soil on which we live to-day as a gift from Heaven, but had to fight for it with the sacrifice of their lives, so in future no national grace will secure our soil and the life of our people, but only the power of the victorious sword" (pp. 740-1).

"However much we realise the necessity of a settlement of accounts with France, it would remain ineffectual for our great line if this were the exclusive aim of our foreign policy. Such a settlement can and will only be of any significance in so far as it provides security in our rear for the task of enlarging our living space in Europe. For we must look not to colonial conquests for a solution of this question, but exclusively to the acquisition of an area of settlement that enlarges the size of the home country itself. . . .

"Germany will either be a world Power or nothing at all. But to be a world Power it requires a territory which gives it the necessary strength in the world of to-day and life to its citizens.

"Thus we National Socialists consciously turn our backs on the foreign orientation of our pre-war period. We begin where we left off six centuries ago.<sup>2</sup> We have finished with the eternal Germanic crusades towards the south and west of Europe, and turn our eyes towards the land in the east. . . . But when we speak to-day of new soil in Europe we can in the first instance only think of Russia and the border States subordinate to her" (pp. 741-2).

"The giant empire in the east is ripe for collapse. And the end of the Jewish rule in Russia will also be the end of Russia as a State. We are chosen by fate to become the witnesses of a catastrophe which will be the most powerful proof of the correctness of the national race theory" (p. 743).

As an immediate policy, Hitler advocated an "Anglo-German-Italian Alliance" which would ensure that "the mortal enemy of our people, France, is left in isolation" (pp. 755-6). The overthrow of

<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the 10th century, the whole of what is now central and eastern Germany was inhabited up to the Labe (Elbe) by Slav tribes. From then onwards for some 300 years the German feudal nobility waged wars of extermination against them, settling the land with German colonists and monasteries; or, further east along the Baltic seaboard, carving out feudal estates in which the native peoples worked as serfs or slaves. German progress eastward was stopped by the Russian forces of Alexander Nevsky, Prince of Novgorod, in the "Battle on the Ice" (1242); and a second drive was defeated by combined Russian, Lithuanian, Polish, Belorussian, Kievan and Czech forces at Tannenberg-Grünwald (1410).

France would give Germany the strength necessary for the proposed "Eastern policy" (p. 757).

It is perhaps necessary to say that Hitler did not immediately offer an alliance to Britain, declare war on France or launch a crusade to the East. The achievement of his basic objectives, said his intimate confidant and interpreter many years later, "seems to be characterised by improvisations. Each succeeding step was apparently carried out as each new situation arose, but all consistent with the ultimate objectives".<sup>3</sup> And he was helped by the widespread belief among influential people in Britain and France that his government was an "added bulwark against the spread of Communism towards Western Europe", a "rampart against Communism".<sup>4</sup>

Step by step the "improvisations" took shape.

#### *The Four-Power Pact*

In March, 1933, Mussolini invited the British Premier and Foreign Secretary (Ramsay MacDonald and Sir John Simon) to Rome and proposed to them a Four-Power Pact, under which Britain, France, Italy and Germany would co-operate to maintain peace in Europe, to carry out revision of the Peace Treaties, gradually secure arms equality for Germany and co-ordinate their policies in all international disputes. The proposal had Hitler's agreement. The British and French Governments secured majorities for it in their Parliaments. But it continued to arouse violent opposition, not only in Britain and France, but in Poland and other East European States hitherto relying on French support—Yugoslavia, Rumania and Czechoslovakia. Finally it was much revised, so as to appear to be in conformity with the League Covenant and the Locarno Treaty: and was signed on June 8, 1933. It was never ratified.

But Hitler had won a success. For the first time—if only for a moment—the idea of a kind of directorate of the Western Powers, including Germany, had been substituted for the League Council. For the first time—if only for a moment—the French and British Governments had accepted the principle of a substantial increase in German armaments. By the reference to treaty revision, to be agreed primarily between the four Powers, they alarmed the four smaller countries above mentioned, who immediately concluded that this

<sup>3</sup> *The Trial of German Major War Criminals. Proceedings of the International Tribunal at Nuremberg* (referred to further as *Trial*), part X, p. 143, Interrogation of Paul Otto Schmidt.

<sup>4</sup> J. W. Wheeler-Bennett, *Munich, Prologue to Tragedy* (1948), pp. 232, 234.

would be done at their expense—particularly the Poles: and this still further weakened the alliances in central and eastern Europe by which the victorious Powers had underpinned the Treaty of Versailles.<sup>5</sup> By excluding the U.S.S.R. from the proposed arrangement, it seemed to take over one of Hitler's cardinal aims. "The danger of the Four-Power Pact was to let it be believed that we were neglecting Russia and that we were going to leave Germany a free hand in the east", wrote General Gamelin, chief of the French General Staff (true, many years afterwards).<sup>6</sup>

There was an unmistakable sign of the encouragement this gave to Hitler. On May 11, 1933, the German Foreign Minister Neurath published an article announcing that his country would equip itself with aircraft, heavy artillery, and land forces irrespective of the results of the Disarmament Conference. The next day Hitler's deputy Chancellor, von Papen, said in a speech at Münster that since January 30 Germany had "struck the word pacifism out of its dictionary".<sup>7</sup>

When Germany on October 4, 1933, suddenly withdrew from the League of Nations and from the Disarmament Conference, with the obvious intention of carrying out the intentions thus openly announced, the British press close to the Government (and most of the other newspapers as well) suddenly abandoned the previous line of sharp criticism of the Germans for their armaments demands. Threats by British Ministers—Lord Hailsham, War Minister (May 11) and the Prime Minister himself (October 6)—to carry out sanctions if there were any breach of the Versailles Treaty and the Locarno Pact, were forgotten. Instead, the press began championing the German cause against the French, and warning France against any "hasty action". The result was that no international action of any kind was taken against Germany, hasty or otherwise. Yet she was still completely powerless to resist the British and French armed forces if they took drastic measures, and in fact the British Government's military adviser at Geneva suggested to Sir John Simon that the Rhine bridgeheads should be occupied. But nothing was done—perhaps just because that adviser thought that such action "would have ensured a change of régime in

<sup>5</sup> See the vivid account by Robert Dell, *The Geneva Racket* (1940), pp. 199-202 (Dell was special correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian* in Geneva for many years), and Walters, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 544-6.

<sup>6</sup> *Servir*, vol. II (1946), p. 94. The German military attaché in London has recorded how impressed he was when, that autumn, the Director of Military Intelligence, General Sir William Bartholomew, suddenly asked him in the middle of a conversation: "What are your intentions with regard to the Ukraine?" (Geyr von Schweppenburg, *The Critical Years*, 1952, p. 37).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by *Istoria Diplomatii*, vol. III, p. 473.

Germany".<sup>8</sup> Hitler understood that the road to German rearmament was now finally open.

### *The Eastern Locarno*

In the spring and summer of 1934, the growing alarm of the small States in Eastern Europe, from the Baltic to the Black Sea, in face of German rearmament, led the Soviet Government to propose first a Baltic Pact, and then a general Eastern Pact of mutual assistance, in which Germany, Poland and the U.S.S.R. should enter on terms of equality, guaranteeing one another's frontiers and those of the other adherent States. It accepted the proposal of Barthou, the French Foreign Minister, that France should be a guarantor of the Eastern Pact while the U.S.S.R. should become guarantor of the 1925 Locarno Pact. But the frankly hostile tone of the politicians and press closest in touch with the British Government encouraged Poland and Germany to reject these schemes.

Out of many examples that could be given, one must suffice. The Viennese *Neue Freie Presse* on May 17, 1934, published its London correspondent's interview with "a prominent English Conservative statesman", outlining British policy as follows: (i) "We give Japan freedom of action with regard to Russia"; (ii) "We give Germany the right to rearm; we conclude an alliance with France so that, as a result of Franco-British co-operation, an expansion by Germany to the west will be impossible. On the other hand, we open to Germany the way to the east by giving it a possibility of expansion. By this means we divert Japan and Germany and keep Russia in check." Although the paper did not reveal the identity of the statesman, the sensation which the interview aroused in Europe led to its speedy discovery. It was Lord Lloyd—a former Governor of Bombay, a friend of Winston Churchill and of Neville Chamberlain, and certainly an impressive figure of the inner circle in the British ruling class, whether in office or out of it.<sup>9</sup>

And although the firm course steered by Barthou towards such pacts, or at least a tripartite Franco-German-Soviet Pact, led to a weakening of overt British hostility to the scheme, and even to a series of declarations in Parliament in July, 1934, approving of it, no sooner was Barthou assassinated by the agents of Hitler and Mussolini on

<sup>8</sup> Major-General A. C. Temperley, *The Whispering Gallery of Europe* (1938), pp. 249-50. Temperley was the adviser.

<sup>9</sup> Keith Feiling, *The Life of Neville Chamberlain* (1946), p. 285, gives an indication of Lloyd's "powerful" position as one of a group of "ex-Ministers or would-be Ministers"—what in French politics are called *ministres*.



October 9, 1934, than the old note began to appear in the governmental press in London.<sup>10</sup> Hitler refused to join the Pact, which would have been a brake on his activities.

### *Rearmament*

Hitler now took the next steps. On March 11, 1935, he announced the formation of—or rather brought out into the open—the new German Air Force, and on the 16th reintroduced conscription: both violations of the Versailles Treaty. In conversation with Sir John (later Lord) Simon, the Foreign Secretary, at Berlin on March 25, Hitler told him he needed thirty-six divisions (550,000 men), 35 per cent. of British naval tonnage and air parity with Britain and France. Moreover, Hitler once again made clear to him that he would never sign an eastern pact, nor one guaranteeing Austrian independence—"that Germany greatly desires a good understanding with Britain, but that she is determined to go her own course in rearmament; that she expects in time to get all Germans within her borders, including Austria; that she does not fear isolation, and has no intention of joining in collective security. . . ." In the memorandum which Simon made of this talk, he admitted that the obvious conclusion ought to be co-operation of the rest of Europe—"British Tories collaborating with Russian Communists": but he "most gravely" doubted that this would preserve the peace.<sup>11</sup> Nor was this opinion confined to Cabinet memoranda. "Germany means to make war. The present rulers of that country are absolutely and resolutely bent on pursuing a policy of war. If that was in doubt before Sir John Simon went to Berlin, it is in no doubt now", wrote Lord Beaverbrook in the *Sunday Express* (March 31, 1935). The commentator in the *Sunday Times*, the same day, made it more precise, in exactly the same sense as Simon: "The new Germany which wants peace on her western borders also has eastern frontiers where, though her immediate intentions may be peaceful, she has political ambitions which it may be impossible to satisfy without war. . . . *She might even argue to herself that she would be rendering a*

<sup>10</sup> Thus Lord Lothian (formerly a secretary to Lloyd George in the 1914-18 war, a friend of Lord Halifax and of Geoffrey Dawson, the editor of *The Times*), after interviewing Hitler and other Nazi chiefs, declared at the end of January, 1935, that he had "not the slightest doubt" about Hitler's sincerity in renouncing war and any designs on his neighbours, if he were only given equality. *The Times* commented (January 31): "Lord Lothian is not the first observer in Germany to be convinced that, in the first place, she does not want war and that, in the second, her eyes are turned anxiously towards the East rather than the West."

<sup>11</sup> Viscount Simon, *Retrospect* (1952), p. 203. Neville Chamberlain's comment on Hitler's attitude to the U.S.S.R. in a private letter on March 30, was (after hearing Simon's report): "I don't think it's unreasonable" (Feiling, *op. cit.*, p. 256).

*service to western politics as well as to her own ambitions, if she detached the Ukraine"* (my italics).

What conclusion, however, did the British Government draw? True, it supported a French appeal to the League against the breach of the Peace Treaty as a threat to peace: but Hitler had some reason to expect that nothing much would come of that, beyond a resolution deploring his action. What was important—Hitler knew it already, but the world only learned of it some five weeks later—was that, without consulting the French with whom Britain was jointly appealing against a breach of solemn engagements, Simon during the talks had suggested (on Hitler's declaration about warship tonnage) that "German representatives should come to London for a preliminary discussion with a view to a naval agreement in the future".<sup>12</sup> In due course this took place, and a naval agreement agreeing to the 35 per cent. tonnage ratio for Germany—and a large submarine tonnage, also a breach of the Peace Treaty—was signed, in spite of a French protest, on June 18, 1935.<sup>13</sup>

Extreme embarrassment has been shown by all the Conservative writers on this action ever since: such a calculated piece of perfidy towards a close ally has rarely been justified on a flimsier official excuse—that Hitler was breaking the Treaty already, and a voluntary agreement on his part would at any rate set a limit to his naval construction. Hardly any have had the courage to point out that, while opinions might differ as to what proportion of the British Navy would have to be kept in the North Sea after the Treaty, and as to the strain it would impose on France—nominally enjoying a 40 per cent. superiority over Germany, but in fact mainly possessed of older vessels—there could be no doubt that it made the German Navy "master of the Baltic".<sup>14</sup> In effect, so far as it went, it gave Hitler the free hand in eastern Europe which he was demanding.

Meanwhile, in April, the British Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary had been in conference with the corresponding French and Italian Ministers at Stresa, in northern Italy. They were to discuss Hitler's announcements, and it appeared probable that a new declaration would be made in favour of security in eastern Europe no less than in the west (i.e. warning Hitler that he could not expand eastward any more than westward). It was Mr. Neville Chamberlain himself

<sup>12</sup> *Hansard*, May 2, 1935 (statement by the Prime Minister).

<sup>13</sup> British aggregate tonnage at that time was about 1,200,000 tons: Germany thus gained the right to a total of 400,000 tons: she actually possessed at the time under 80,000 tons of modern warships (*Istoria Diplomatica*, vol. III, p. 547).

<sup>14</sup> Churchill, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

(then Chancellor of the Exchequer) who, under the guise of "an authoritative quarter", told the parliamentary correspondents of the British newspapers<sup>15</sup> that there could be no question of further British commitments in Europe, that collective security beyond the Rhine presented little more than academic interest to Great Britain, and that what Great Britain was really interested in was an air pact in the west (i.e. the closing of the door to German aggression *westward*). The statement was "indignantly" repudiated at Stresa by the British delegation, and the Foreign Office in London issued a polite correction, to the effect that the statement printed in the press "should not be taken as representing any new official pronouncement". In fact, however, the British delegation made clear that they would not consider applying sanctions against Germany for breaking the Treaty. And the Germans understood very well, as did indeed most other observers of international affairs, that it was the time and manner of publication that upset the Foreign Office, rather than the substance of Mr. Chamberlain's remarks.

This was confirmed by the fact that the Stresa Conference duly adopted a resolution on April 14 pledging opposition "by all possible means" to unilateral violations of treaties threatening peace—and two months later Great Britain and Germany joined in precisely such a violation, in the shape of the Naval Treaty!

### *Ethiopia*

Laval, a patron of Fascism, became the French Prime Minister in June, 1935, and he replied to these tactics of the British Government by according his moral support to Italy in a war of aggression against Ethiopia, which began almost immediately.<sup>16</sup> This support was undoubtedly of importance for Mussolini; it played an invaluable part, from his point of view, when the notorious "Hoare-Laval" proposals (or, more truly, Vansittart-Hoare plan) for securing peace by dismembering Ethiopia and putting her virtually under Italian control, were revealed later in the year. But the proposals were formulated on the initiative of the British Government. On September 9—before making a great speech at the League Assembly declaring that the British policy was "steady and collective resistance to aggression"—Sir Samuel Hoare had informed Laval that in no circumstances would

<sup>15</sup> April 11, 1935—the day the conference opened.

<sup>16</sup> Circumstantial evidence on the question of who bore most responsibility for the tactics which helped Mussolini in this war—the French or the British Government—is provided by A. Werth, *The Destiny of France* (1937), ch. 11, and Dell, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-15, 129-30.

the British Government apply any sanctions to Italy other than economic and financial sanctions, and that a naval blockade of Italy or the closing of the Suez Canal were quite out of the question.<sup>17</sup> When the war reached its critical stage in December, 1935, and again in January, 1936, the head of the British delegation at Geneva (Mr. Eden) informed Maxim Litvinov, head of the Soviet delegation, which was pressing for oil sanctions against Italy,<sup>18</sup> that there could be no question of these either, since they might involve a risk of general war.

It is true that by this time the British Government had safely rounded the danger-point of a General Election, in which it had secured an overwhelming majority on the strength of Sir Samuel Hoare's declaration and of a flood of similar pledges. But, as Neville Chamberlain told a foreign diplomat at that time, there could be no question of letting Mussolini be overthrown in consequence of a military defeat, since this would mean "chaos in Italy",<sup>19</sup> i.e. revolution.

### *The Rhineland*

Once again, Hitler took his cue, and in March, 1936, sent his troops into the Rhineland, which had been demilitarised by the Versailles Treaty, reaffirmed in this respect by the Locarno Treaties of 1925. At the same time he offered a twenty-five-years pact of peace, an air pact, etc. The French Cabinet considered ordering mobilisation, but the majority opposed it—partly because the War Minister stated that a general mobilisation was necessary if there was to be any action at all under the Peace Treaty and the Locarno Pact: partly because the British Government by telephone was urging them to "keep calm"—which they interpreted as a threat not to support them against

<sup>17</sup> French Note to Great Britain, October 18, 1935, quoted by Dell, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-1. It is interesting that politicians with such divergent views as Chamberlain and Churchill agreed that it was Mussolini's régime which was in danger if there were a war, not Britain, and that his threats were bluff (Feiling, *op. cit.*, pp. 272-3; Churchill, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-8).

<sup>18</sup> By December 12, 1935, when the League's Committee on Sanctions was due to meet, the U.S.S.R., Iraq, the Netherlands, Rumania and five other Powers—suppliers of just under 75 per cent. of Italy's oil imports—were ready to impose oil sanctions.

<sup>19</sup> The diplomat, a man of exceptional caution, informed the writer. Churchill, *op. cit.*, p. 133, records his alarm at the possibility which Count Grandi, the Italian Ambassador with whom he was talking (September 28, 1935), called "the fall of the régime". Three days later he wrote to Sir Austen Chamberlain: "It would be a terrible deed to smash up Italy" (*ibid.*, p. 136). F. P. Walters, Deputy Secretary-General of the League of Nations for many years, wrote in his history of that organisation (*op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 673) that some of the chief Foreign Office officials "had no desire to see Mussolini overthrown" and that there was fear lest "the defeat of Mussolini should lead to Communism in Italy" (*ibid.*, p. 704). A glance at *Lessons of My Life* (1943, ch. IV) will leave little doubt that Vansittart held such views—and he was Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.



Hitler. In fact, the French Government decided only to appeal to the League Council (which was held in London on March 14-19) and in the meantime to consult with the signatories of Locarno. When they did so, they found that all the pledges of Locarno were abandoned. Both Mr. Eden, the new Foreign Secretary, and Neville Chamberlain (still Chancellor of the Exchequer, but acting for the Prime Minister Baldwin) were emphatic that nothing should be done to clash with Hitler, and that full advantage should be taken of his offers to negotiate. In fact all that was decided by the Council was that there had been a breach of the Treaty, and to ask Hitler for further guarantees that he meant no harm—the British Government promising really to support France if he went back on his word.<sup>20</sup>

Litvinov on March 17, speaking in the League Council for the Soviet Union, thoroughly exposed Hitler's pretence of being concerned for peace, and analysed the real aggressive theory and practice of Nazi Germany. Although not a signatory either of the Versailles Treaty or of the Locarno Pact, the Soviet Union was "ready to take part in all measures that may be proposed to the Council of the League by the Locarno Powers and will be acceptable to other members of the Council".<sup>21</sup> But this solitary voice was ignored.

It is now known that in fact Hitler had instructed his generals, who were protesting against the gamble, to withdraw if French troops entered the Rhineland. With nearly a hundred divisions on mobilisation, and an air force still far more powerful than the German, France could have enforced her will alone (Churchill has pointed out). So general was the expectation of this that the Polish Government, one of the most reactionary in Europe and increasingly pro-Hitler in its policy, informed the French Ambassador in Warsaw on the very evening of Hitler's move that it would mobilise if France did. Nevertheless, Hitler was allowed to bring forward many miles his advanced bases for an attack on France, and to gain territory on which to build fortifications which were bound seriously to interfere with France's help to her allies in Central and Eastern Europe.

Why was this permitted? Only the most delicate of hints have appeared in print, so far, from those inside the top Tory circle. One of Stanley Baldwin's closest friends, Thomas Jones (a member of the Cabinet Secretariat from 1916 to 1930, and an intimate of many other

<sup>20</sup> J. Paul-Boncour, the French Foreign Minister, has given a pretty full picture of this affair (*Entre Deux Guerres*, vol. III, 1946, pp. 33-44). In essence Feiling, Chamberlain's biographer, confirms it (*op. cit.*, p. 279).

<sup>21</sup> Maxim Litvinov, *Against Aggression* (1939), pp. 22-34.

leading Tories), has recorded that Tory backbenchers' meetings in the last week of March had swung round from a pro-French to a pro-German majority—partly "influenced by the fear of our being drawn in on the side of Russia".<sup>22</sup> On May 23, writing to a friend from Chequers, where he was spending a week-end with Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin, Jones said: "We have to choose between Russia and Germany, and choose soon. . . . Hitler feels quite unequal to standing up alone to Russia. . . . He is therefore asking for an alliance with us to form a bulwark against the spread of Communism. Our P.M. is not indisposed to attempt this."<sup>23</sup> Editorials in *The Times*—whose editor, Geoffrey Dawson, was another close friend of Baldwin and other Tory leaders—urged that the need of the moment was to "re-build" on the basis of Hitler's offer (March 9), which represented "the best immediate hope of the stabilisation of *Western Europe*" (July 6)—my italics; and the paper expressed disapproval of France's pact of mutual assistance with the U.S.S.R. Thus, according to its own historians, it "tacitly admitted the fact, if not the right, of German dealings with Russia".<sup>24</sup> Another intimate of the Government's leading figures, of Thomas Jones and (as mentioned earlier) of Geoffrey Dawson, was Lord Lothian. He was a convinced supporter of Hitler's arguments, and in April denounced the Soviet Union as anxious "to maintain discord in Europe". Litvinov's speech of March 17, 1936, he declared, was for this reason "the most sinister speech ever made at the Council of the League since its inception".<sup>25</sup> (It is worth recalling that, after a talk with Lothian, William Dodd, the United States Ambassador at Berlin, had made this note in his diary for May 6, 1935: "He favours a coalition of the democracies to block any move in their direction, and to turn Germany's course eastwards. That this might lead to war between Russia and Germany does not seem to disturb him seriously. In fact he seems to feel this would be a good solution of the difficulties imposed on Germany by the Versailles Treaty.")

It is fairly clear that, when Mr. Churchill wrote that a check to Hitler in the Rhineland "might well have proved fatal to his rule",<sup>26</sup> he was stating one of the very reasons why the British Government used its influence to prevent that check being inflicted.

<sup>22</sup> *A Diary with Letters, 1931-1950* (1954), p. 185.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>24</sup> *History of "The Times"*, vol. IV (1952), pp. 899, 902.

<sup>25</sup> Royal Institute of International Affairs, *Germany and the Rhineland* (1936), p. 55. The speech was delivered at a private discussion at Chatham House: but, with a number of others, it was published the same month.

<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 152.



*The Attack on Spain*

The ground was now suitable for a real military challenge by Hitler and Mussolini. In July, 1936, prepared by careful consultations with the General Staffs in Berlin and Rome, a Fascist military rebellion began in Spanish Morocco against the legitimate Government formed after the General Election of February 16, 1936. It was revealed, almost at once, as a mere camouflage for invasion by Germany and Italy, to put in their own creature as dictator. They helped to transport the rebel forces to Spain itself. Their planes, warships and military experts participated from the very first.<sup>27</sup> By March, 1937, their troops numbered almost 100,000. The overwhelming sympathy of the mass of the people in France and Britain (as elsewhere) was with the Republican Government; which, deprived of the bulk of its officers as well as of arms, munitions and planes, began building a new army and ordering war material from abroad. But the British Government threatened that, if war with Germany or Italy broke out through the French Government allowing the Spanish Republic to import arms, it would not necessarily honour its obligations to France. The warning was conveyed to the French Premier Blum first during a visit to London in July, and then by diplomatic channels in August. At the same time the Radical Ministers in the Blum Cabinet—who had earlier in the year led the Government at the time of the Rhineland crisis—threatened to resign if the Spanish Republic were supported: their attitude was enthusiastically endorsed by the Right parties.<sup>28</sup>

The French Government under this double pressure adopted the policy of “non-intervention” (never yet so clearly revealed to be what Talleyrand called it over a century before—“a diplomatic phrase which means ‘intervention’”) proposed by the British Government. A Non-Intervention Committee was set up in London by the European Powers, on the grounds that this would limit the conflict. The British Government repeatedly supported this contention in Parliament and at the League, arguing that any other policy would mean dividing the world into “ideological blocs”.<sup>29</sup> The Soviet Union protested against the policy, as meaning in effect freedom for Germany and Italy to organise rebellion and a blockade of the legitimate Government of Spain.

When it became clear that these arguments had no effect, the Soviet

<sup>27</sup> A witness who can scarcely be suspected of partiality on this is Sumner Welles (U.S. Under-Secretary of State), *The Time for Decision* (1944), p. 49.

<sup>28</sup> The story is told very fully in Werth, *Destiny of France*, ch. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Dell tells the story of the intrigues in the League of Nations, of which he was a witness and very well informed, in chapter 12 of his *Geneva Racket*.

Union in October, 1936, began sending aeroplanes, guns and officers to Spain: and thousands of genuine volunteers from fifty-four countries went to help the cause of Spanish democracy.<sup>30</sup> But they had to run the gauntlet of the police of several countries, including the French, and to face shortage of arms when they got to Spain: while the Soviet ships bringing weapons to Spain had to run the gauntlet of Italian and German submarines during their nearly 2,000-mile journey.<sup>31</sup> Finally the Anglo-French blockade and the German-Italian invasion accomplished their purpose, and the Republic was defeated and overthrown in 1939.<sup>32</sup>

It is significant that the Spanish war, in which Nazi Germany in alliance with Fascist Italy first passed to open military operations in western Europe, was the occasion for a long and sustained campaign in the French and British Conservative press, accusing the U.S.S.R. of being at least as responsible for events as Germany and Italy: in terms which made it clear that, should Germany and her allies use the pretext of Soviet assistance to the Spanish Republic for an attack on the U.S.S.R., neither France nor Britain would hold themselves bound by either League obligations of collective security under the Covenant or by the Franco-Soviet mutual assistance treaty. And the legend that it was “six of one and half a dozen of the other” has been maintained ever since, as anyone who takes the trouble to consult the memoirs or biographies of the principal directors of Western policy, particularly the British—Neville Chamberlain, Lord Halifax, Viscount Simon, the then editor of *The Times* and others—can see. Yet it is only a legend, and one trading on gross ignorance—ignorance to which, as the far from revolutionary author of *A History of the League of Nations* has rightly pointed out, a League-minded Tory like Eden contributed, no less than his fellow-Tory Chamberlain.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> The Spanish Republic's struggle is movingly described by Alvarez del Vayo, who was its Foreign Minister (*Freedom's Battle*, 1940). For the story of the British volunteers, see William Rust, *Britons in Spain* (1939). A survey of the contribution of the International Brigades is made by Jose Garcia, *Internatsionalnye brigady v Ispanii* (1936-1938 g.g.) in the Soviet historical journal *Voprosy Istorii* (No. 7, 1956). Other works by participants (which the writer has not himself seen) are: S. Nelson, *The Volunteers* (New York, 1953), Ludwig Renn, *Der Spanische Krieg* (Berlin, 1955), L. Longo, *Le Brigade Internazionali in Spagna* (Rome, 1956), and *Epopée d'Espagne* (Paris, 1957).

<sup>31</sup> Total Soviet deliveries to the Spanish Government, which were supplied on credit, were to the value of \$85 millions: large quantities of foodstuffs, clothing, drugs, etc., were sent as free gifts (*Istoria Mejdunarodnykh Otnoshenii i Vneshnei Politiki S.S.S.R.*, Moscow, 1957, p. 232).

<sup>32</sup> A. Berriedale Keith, the well-known Conservative constitutional historian, wrote: “General Franco's victory was essentially one of foreigners over Spaniards” (*The Causes of the War*, 1940, p. 309).

<sup>33</sup> F. P. Walters, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 729-30. Walters has many damning observations on the “equal guilt” legend.



But why was the legend launched? More important, why did the rulers of Britain and France pursue the policy they did, so obviously and flagrantly weakening their own positions in the world (since it set up a third Fascist menace on France's frontiers)?

One argument which was widely used for not helping the Republic was—as on Ethiopia and the Rhineland—the alleged danger of war and the unpreparedness of Britain and France. Yet for many months Germany and Italy failed to attack the U.S.S.R. which was helping the Republic on its own—when they knew that an anti-Soviet war on their part would have been applauded by Britain and France. How much more cautious they would have been if the latter had joined forces with the U.S.S.R.! Even more striking is what happened in September, 1937, when Germany and Italy, feeling themselves thoroughly masters of the situation, not only began torpedoing British merchant vessels but on August 31 attacked a British destroyer as well. The whole scene changed like lightning. The British and French Governments forgot all the excuses about the danger of war. A few days later they called a conference of Mediterranean States, including the U.S.S.R.: it met at Nyon in Switzerland on September 10: within thirty-six hours an agreement was initialled to sink at sight unknown submarines which failed to give their identity when called upon; and by September 14 the agreement was signed and in force. No more submarine attacks took place—except on Spanish ships, which were expressly excluded in spite of Litvinov's protests. And no declarations of war followed.

It is interesting to note that two British statesmen of very opposed, though Conservative, tendencies commented in very similar terms. "Undoubtedly similar vigorous procedure could have stopped the Spanish war, and, indeed, could have called a halt to the whole policy of aggression by Germany and her imitators", wrote Viscount Cecil (Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs and Minister of Blockade during the first world war, Lord Privy Seal charged with League Affairs and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster after the war, repeatedly a British delegate to the League). Mr. Churchill said that the Nyon Conference was "a proof of how powerful the combined influence of Britain and France, if expressed with conviction and a readiness to use force, would have been upon the mood and policy of the Dictators . . . any sign of a positive counter-offensive by the Western Democracies immediately produced an abatement of tension".<sup>34</sup>

But why, then, was there no such counter-offensive? Why did they

<sup>34</sup> Cecil, *A Great Experiment* (1941), p. 292; Churchill, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

not call a halt to Germany's aggression? The leaders of the Western Governments have not been very communicative. But by good luck an extraordinarily brilliant flash of light has been shed on the very centre of the darkness, by one who knew them well.

"July 27 (1936). I went straight from L.G. (Lloyd George) to lunch with S.B. (Stanley Baldwin) at No. 10 (Downing Street). . . . S.B. was much affected by the Spanish troubles. 'I told Eden yesterday that on no account, French or other, must he bring us in to fight on the side of the Russians.'" Earlier in the conversation, Baldwin told the diarist that the decision of the British, French and Belgian Governments, four days before, to convene a meeting of the five Locarno Powers (themselves with Germany and Italy) did not mean that the latter "must agree to participate in conversations on a *European Locarno*" (underlined by the diarist).<sup>35</sup>

Nothing could be plainer. Restore the old Locarno—i.e. mutual guarantees of security in the *West*, rudely shattered when Hitler sent his troops into the Rhineland on March 7? Yes—but only for the West: there would be no attempt to restrain Germany in the East by an all-Europe arrangement. Solidarity with France, if Germany attacks her on the pretext that she is allowing the Spanish Government to buy arms—thereby bringing in the U.S.S.R. under the Franco-Soviet Pact? On no account. In other words, Russia was the real enemy, for the British Government—and its Spanish policy followed from that.

It is only in the light of such directives that one can at last explain the extraordinary remark by Eden in Parliament on November 19 the same year—which caused much talk at the time, but over which the veil of time was allowed to drop: "So far as non-intervention is concerned, I say categorically that I think there are other Governments more to blame than those of Germany and Italy." Eden was preparing public opinion for support of Germany should she strike eastwards.

#### *The Attack on China*

A year later Japan—now formally allied to Germany by an "Anti-Comintern Pact" (November, 1936), a title which made the fact of the aggressor alliance sound more attractive in certain ears—took advantage of the differences between the Powers to advance her campaign for the conquest of China which had begun in 1931. She launched a large-scale war in northern and central China in July, 1937, which incidentally threatened the last vestiges of British and

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

American interests in China. The representatives of both countries at the Brussels Conference of Powers affected, convened on November 3, 1937, to discuss the war, made it clear that they were against any effective action in support of China—in which action, the Soviet representative Potemkin plainly stated, his country was prepared to co-operate. So far as Japan was concerned, all the other Powers would do was to send her humble invitations to come to the Conference—which she twice rejected—and finally to beg her to change her attitude to China and seek a “peaceful solution”. But in regard to the U.S.S.R. they attempted an ingenious manoeuvre, through the conference chairman Spaak (the Belgian Foreign Minister). They proposed that the U.S.A. and Great Britain should carry out a “naval demonstration” in Far Eastern waters (which of course would mean little or nothing to the Japanese, since the British and American naval bases were a very long way away), while the U.S.S.R.’s “share” would be to . . . mobilise land forces along the Manchurian border and send air forces over Tokyo (which naturally would immediately precipitate war). Needless to say, the suggestion was rejected.

It was all the more impudent, so far as the British Government was concerned, because of the following. At the recent meeting of the League Assembly (September, 1937), it had subscribed—like other governments—to a general pledge to do nothing to help the Japanese, and to consider individually how they could help the Chinese. The net result of this resolution, so far as the British Government was concerned, was a repeated refusal to place an embargo on the export of armaments and other necessities of war to Japan, and the conclusion (May, 1938) of an agreement with the Japanese which gave the advantages of diplomatic recognition to their seizure of the Chinese Customs—at the price of a promise to pay to Great Britain that share of the proceeds which was earmarked for service of the Chinese debt. The policy of the United States was a little better: its businessmen sold oil, cotton and scrap metal to Japan, but also some materials to China. The Soviet Union, which had signed a non-aggression agreement with China a month after the new Japanese attack began (it had earlier offered a mutual assistance pact), began sending arms and equipment soon after, and in 1938 provided a loan of \$100 millions to China. This explains the statement of the Chinese delegate at the League Council’s session in May that year: “The League members, with one exception, have done little or nothing to aid China in her struggle against aggression.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> *Monthly Summary of the League of Nations*, May, 1938, p. 106.

### *Austria*

After this chain of events in the process of “appeasing” Hitler and his allies, it was scarcely to be expected that in March, 1938, when Hitler seized and annexed Austria in defiance of numerous pledges to the contrary, the British Government should do anything but publicly refuse—in Parliament on the day before the invasion—even to make representations to him about the consequences of such an action.<sup>37</sup> Of any collective measures in effective restraint of Hitler there was no question at all.

The truth was that on both sides the issue was predetermined. As long ago as July, 1936, as the Nuremberg trials of the Nazi leaders proved ten years later, Hitler had ordered military plans to be drawn up for the invasion of Austria (called by the code-title “Case Otto”): and on November 5, 1937, in the talk with his chief military leaders recorded in the published German archives<sup>38</sup> as the “Hossbach Memorandum”, he spoke of a war “to overthrow Czechoslovakia and Austria simultaneously”. On the other side—Thomas Jones had put down in his diary for May 23, 1936—Stanley Baldwin (then Prime Minister) considered that “we should not be compromised into undertaking to protect Austria from falling into the lap of Germany”. Lord Halifax in a private interview with Hitler on November 19, 1937, recorded in the German archives, mentioned Austria among those “possible alterations in the European order which might be destined to come about with the passage of time” (though he added that Britain was concerned that these alterations should take place by means of peaceful evolution). Mr. Eden (then Foreign Secretary) let the German Ambassador Ribbentrop know on December 2, 1937 (again according to the German archives), that in recent conversations with French Ministers he had informed them “that the question of Austria was of much greater interest to Italy than to Britain: furthermore, people in England recognised that a closer connection between Germany and Austria would have to come about some time” (again with the reservation that force should be avoided).<sup>39</sup> As for the French Government, its Premier Chautemps told the German Ambassador in Vienna, von Papen, in November, 1937, that he “had no objection to a marked extension of German influence in Austria obtained through evolutionary means” (and the Foreign Minister Bonnet had said the same).<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Mr. Chamberlain in the House of Commons, March 11, 1938.

<sup>38</sup> *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Series D* (referred to further as D.G.F.P.), vol. 1, pp. 29-39.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42-4.



One may guess that both parties in these diplomatic conversations knew precisely what weight should be given to the reservations about peaceful and evolutionary means, after the examples of the Rhineland remilitarisation and the bloody struggle in Spain.

At all events, Hitler took the hint to heart. He surrounded Austria with large German forces in the first fortnight of February. He summoned the Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg to his seat at Berchtesgaden on February 12, 1938, and forced him to agree, under threat of Austria being invaded within three days, to put Seyss-Inquart, a well-known Austrian Nazi, in charge of the Ministry of Security and to give the Austrian Nazis (a well-equipped branch of the German Nazi organisation) full freedom of activity. And, when Schuschnigg on March 9 announced that a plebiscite would be held on whether Austria should remain independent, Hitler sent him, on March 11, a two-hour ultimatum (through the Austrian Nazis, so that it should not come "from outside") to resign in favour of Seyss-Inquart, failing which 200,000 men would invade Austria. Schuschnigg did resign, Seyss-Inquart took his place, and that very night the Germans marched in after all. Two days later Austria was annexed to Germany. Very "evolutionary".<sup>41</sup>

The mass of the people in all countries did not know of the political and diplomatic conversations which preceded these events. The documents and memoirs were not published until ten years later, or more—after the most devastating war in history had ravaged many countries, and Hitler's régime had been destroyed by force of arms. What the world did see was the events of March 11-13, and the Nazi atrocities which followed. They also heard the British and French politicians and historians explaining why these had been allowed to happen (often before they happened). There was no invasion: juridically the Austro-German agreement was "unobjectionable": it did not violate Austria's treaty obligations: it was inevitable anyhow: the Stresa Agreement of 1935 pledging Britain, France and Italy to uphold Austrian independence did not operate unless all three were prepared to act: the idea that the League could help a small country was a "delusion" (J. L. Garvin, editor of *The Observer*, December 19, 1937): Britain was too weak anyway to defend herself (this was six months after the Nyon Conference).

But there was also—amid this mass of varied, and often conflicting explanations—another, the same as that used on previous occasions.

<sup>41</sup> The best eye-witness account in English of what happened in Austria is still G. E. R. Gedyc, *Fallen Bastions* (1939).

It was contained in a House of Commons speech by Neville Chamberlain, now Prime Minister, on February 21, 1938. "The peace of Europe must depend upon the attitude of the major Powers—Germany, Italy, France and ourselves": friendly discussion between the four, and a settling of their differences, would save the peace of Europe "for a generation". And he expressly excluded the Soviet Union as "half Asiatic". This could hardly have referred to her geography: since on that score the British Empire was four-fifths Asiatic and African. But this was the habitual description used by the Nazis to justify their need for expansion eastwards. And by now it was very difficult to imagine "differences" arising between the four Powers if Hitler attacked the U.S.S.R.

There was an echo of this remark in what Mr. Gedyc, then *The Times* correspondent in Vienna, said he found in London when he came back at the end of March after the seizure of Austria. It was obviously Czechoslovakia's turn next, and he talked about this "to British statesmen and politicians, people from the War Office, famous political writers, editors and Foreign Office people". He said he couldn't understand why the general tendency was to abandon "this last bastion against German expansion" too. They generally replied that Britain could not defend herself; and then, he wrote, the explanation went on: "Probably Chamberlain and his friends hope that if Germany destroys Czechoslovakia, she will go on down through the Balkans and extend eastwards in preparation for an attack on Russia. But by the time she is ready for this, they trust, we and France will be so strong that we shall be able to say to her: 'If you attack us, you will attack a strong opponent, and you know that Russia will attack you from the rear, whereas if you attack Russia, we can promise not to attack you, and to wish you luck.'"<sup>42</sup>

The seizure of Austria was the last of Hitler's improvisations—and saw the last of the improvised network of arguments used in western Europe to justify them—before Munich.

<sup>42</sup> *Fallen Bastions*, p. 356.

## CHAPTER III

## CZECHOSLOVAKIA

THE background of Munich requires at least some reference to Czechoslovakia and its right to exist—which began to be questioned very widely in Britain and France after Hitler's occupation of Austria. This is more necessary because, many years later, we find the man who was Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time (and a former Foreign Secretary) still writing in his reminiscences: "The landlocked state of Czechoslovakia, with an outline like an elongated kidney, was devised by the Allies, and its boundaries drawn by the Treaty of Versailles, in defiance of the doctrine of self-determination and without regard to distinctions of nationality. Geographically and historically, there was nothing to hold the various parts of this heterogeneous combination together."<sup>1</sup>

Such a tissue of absurdities has rarely been committed to print even by a British ex-Cabinet Minister. Of the thirteen and a half million of people registered at the 1921 Census—two years after the Treaty of Versailles—the Czechs and Slovaks between them numbered about nine million. The first represented a big majority of the population in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia: the second a big majority in Slovakia—and the four territories between them make up the Republic. Czech and Slovak tribes are known to have been living in their present lands at least 1200 years ago: to-day as then, they are closely kindred Slav peoples, whose languages differ less than (say) English and American: and they have tenaciously kept their identity under the most adverse circumstances. This alone was ample cement to hold Czechoslovakia together: but there is more. The first organised State with which they are known to have been associated—the Great Moravian Principedom in the 9th century—embraced them both.

At the end of the 9th century the Slovaks were conquered by the Magyars, and remained under their rule, in the feudal kingdom of Hungary, for a thousand years. Yet their language, culture, folklore and, in the last 150 years, their political struggle in far more difficult conditions left them closely akin to the Czechs. For the two peoples

to come together in their own State, as they decided in the great mass upheavals of October, 1918 (when the Austro-Hungarian Empire by which they had been ruled collapsed)—months before the Versailles Treaty—was one of the outstanding acts of self-determination in modern history: and a proof that historically a very great deal was "holding them together".

The greater part of the 2500 miles of Czechoslovakia's frontiers in 1919 were not "drawn by the Versailles Treaty". It was not by chance that the French Note of recognition of June 30, 1918, addressed to the National Council of Bohemian Lands—set up by emigrant foreign political leaders in Paris—spoke of "independence within the historic boundaries of your territories". For the boundaries of Bohemia, Moravia and Czech Silesia, the "lands of the Bohemian Crown", were drawn by nature, settlement and a great history, many centuries before Lord Simon was born.

Look at the map of Germany<sup>2</sup> in the 10th century: you will see the Principality of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia under the suzerainty of the medieval Empire, its basic frontier quadrilateral the same as to-day—Bohemian Forest, Ore Mountains, Sudeten Highlands, White Mountains. Look at the map of Europe in 1914,<sup>3</sup> when the Czechs were ruled by the Austrians and the Slovaks by the Hungarians in the old Empire of the Hapsburgs—and you will see the same. By the last quarter of the 10th century—when Ethelred the Unready ruled a very wobbly English State—the Princes of Prague were not only recognised as rulers of all Czech lands by the Emperor, but held lands far beyond their borders as well. In the middle of the 12th century they themselves became kings and electors to the throne of the "Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation"—and their State was strong enough to rout the assembled German feudal nobility at Chlumec in 1126, and the dread Mongols themselves in Silesia in 1241. Charles I of Luxemburg, King of Bohemia in the 14th century, became the Emperor Charles IV, and Prague was his capital. Incidentally Bohemia twice had the sea-coast which Shakespeare attributed to it—once when the realms of the King reached the Adriatic in the 13th century and once when they stretched to the Baltic at the beginning of the 15th.

With one of the oldest Universities in Central Europe, founded in 1348: with rapidly developing mining, woollen industries and agriculture, with historical chronicles and other literature in its own

<sup>2</sup> E.g. the famous Justus Perthes *Geschichts-Atlas*, in any of its editions.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Grant Robertson and Bartholomew, *Historical Atlas of Modern Europe* (1915).

<sup>1</sup> Viscount Simon, *Retrospect* (1952), p. 239.



language (when chronicles in England were still written in Latin) and with a growing home market in its towns, Bohemia in the 14th century was one of the most advanced centres of civilisation in Europe. Their early reformation and national uprising of the first half of the 15th century, in which John Hus and his followers made the teachings of Wyclif for years the inspiration of a great popular struggle against the German feudal nobles and the Jesuits, brought the Czechs politically into the front rank of European peoples. Although the movement finally broke up along class lines and its most militant element—the peasants and the town artisans—were defeated, its traditions and ideas became a great national heritage of the Czech people. From 1526 they passed under the dominion of the Duke of Austria and in 1620, after an unsuccessful rebellion, that dominion was restored by the defeat inflicted on the Czechs at the battle of the White Mountain, near Prague. Even the savage repressions, compulsory reconversion to Catholicism, reintroduction of serfdom, and wholesale expropriation of Czechs in favour of German nobles, which went on for over 100 years thereafter, did not crush the Czech spirit. Great peasant risings in 1680 and 1775 were a reminder of it, and the second in particular forced the Empire to relax the burdens of serfdom.

When capitalist development in the 18th and early 19th centuries brought Bohemia once again to the position of the most industrially advanced centre in Central and Eastern Europe, the national revival was not only the work of the middle-class intellectuals of the 30s and 40s, most often the subject of historical study. In 1821 there was another big peasant rising; in 1832, 1843 and particularly 1844 a succession of great strikes; and in 1848, a fortnight *before* the "June days" of Paris (when for the first time in Western Europe a working-class insurrection took place), there were five "June days" (from 12th to the 17th) in Prague, in which the factory workers, artisans and students fought for a Czech Provisional Government responsible to an elected Assembly, and a Czech national army. The Czech people of to-day look back through the national revival of the 19th century to the cultural glories of Bohemia in the Middle Ages, of which there are many reminders around them; but the working class and peasants also look back to the great mass struggles of their 18th- and 19th-century ancestors against the Hapsburgs (in which the bourgeoisie for the most part—as in June, 1848—backed the people's enemies) and past them to the great democratic anti-feudal armies of the Taborites and their leaders Žižka and Prokop in the 15th century.

True, the Slovaks were unable to take part in this evolution, ground

under the heel of the Magyar nobles. But when they joined their part of the "kidney" to that of the Czechs in 1918, adding another 1100 miles of frontier to those of the Czech lands—they neither defied "distinction of nationality" nor contributed anything artificial or difficult to "hold together". In the tragic days of Munich it was not the Slovaks who proved a "heterogeneous" element. It was the agents of the Nazis and the Hungarian Fascists among them, who were given fictitious strength by the ability of their patron Hitler to terrorise the Government of the Republic; and then used it to undermine the State.

Ah, but what about the "Sudeten Germans"—three million of them, German-speaking citizens of Czechoslovakia? These were the descendants of Germans who had settled in the Czech lands during the Middle Ages, when Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia were part of the Holy Roman Empire, and during the period of the Hapsburg rule. At no time had they any connection with what is now modern Germany: at most they were part of the Germans of the Austrian realm. In Austria-Hungary, before 1918, they were a section of the two ruling races; their middle classes and landowners provided many of the officials of the Imperial régime, and only the Social-Democratic workers among them refused to regard the Czechs as an "inferior race". Apart from 700,000 of them scattered in "pockets" in the interior, they lived within the historic mountain frontiers of the Czech lands—mostly along the forested mountainous borders, because that was where natural conditions favoured the development of industry in the 18th and 19th centuries: but distributed in eight quite separate areas.

No power on earth could apply the "doctrine of self-determination", in its usual sense, in their case: they could not join Austria, and they could not be constituted as a single administrative unit. And to deprive the Czech lands of their historic frontiers—and make their fortification impossible—by joining these territories to Germany of all countries, at the end of the 1914-18 war: to give that defeated country a series of footholds for later subjugating the Czechs once more in a war of revenge, *footholds which it had never had in history*—would indeed have been "defiance of the doctrine of self-determination".

Moreover, it had become perfectly clear by 1938 that in reality no national minority in Central or Eastern Europe outside the U.S.S.R., and certainly no Germans in Germany itself, enjoyed such political rights as the German citizens of Czechoslovakia. They shared with all other citizens the right of adult suffrage and nomination of their



own candidates to the local and national assemblies: they represented just over 22 per cent. of the population at the 1935 elections, and had 72 M.P.s out of 300 (24 per cent.). Out of 15,000 municipal councils, 3400 were elected in districts where German-speaking citizens were in a majority: the majority of the councillors were therefore German-speaking (under Austro-Hungary the municipalities had been controlled by property-owning people, and the workers had no vote). Out of 3200 judges, 730 were German-speaking—and conducted their courts (if they were in German-speaking areas) in the German language. The vast majority of German-speaking children went to schools where instruction was in their own language. There was a University and many colleges to which the same applied. For one of the changes confirmed by the Czechoslovak Constitution in February, 1920, was that *all citizens could use their mother-tongue in public bodies, in the courts and in all official business*—thereby putting the national minorities of Czechoslovakia in a far superior position to the Welsh in Great Britain.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, Czechoslovakia was a democracy—in sharp contrast with most of the countries by which she was surrounded: Germany, Hungary, Rumania (and after March, 1938, Austria) under open Fascist rule, and Poland a police State ruled by the great landowners and big business, tolerating a certain amount of Parliamentarism tempered by arbitrary arrests and beatings of M.P.s, police control of trade unions and shooting of strikers, etc. In Czechoslovakia there were legal workers' parties, trade unions and a workers' press of every political hue. There was a strong co-operative movement. It was the only country among the six mentioned where anti-Semitism was not practised by the Government. Candidates did not have to put down a deposit when standing for Parliament; and both Houses of Parliament were elected bodies. The President was elected by Parliament.

At the same time, Czechoslovakia was a *bourgeois* democracy, i.e. her democracy was tacitly based on acceptance of the capitalist system by all parties (except the Communists). Within the framework of the democratic Republic, therefore, it was the capitalist class of the most economically developed part of the country—Bohemia and Moravia—which pulled the strings. This had its influence (to take one relevant example) on the Government's nationalities policy. There were some defects in its application to the German-speaking citizens: for example,

<sup>4</sup> In Great Britain in 1938, a Welshman in court might only use his national language if he could show that his knowledge of English was deficient: but he had to be interpreted, because the judge had to conduct the business in English. Welsh may not be used in Parliament. The Post Office has refused to allow envelopes with Welsh imprints to be franked by the machines which it licenses.

the machinery of government—the civil service—had had to be constructed entirely anew after 1918, since it was the Austrians who governed the country beforehand. Naturally, it was not among those of them who remained when the Republic was created that the new officialdom for a number of years was recruited, except in their own areas. By the time they had accepted the new state of things, the posts elsewhere had been filled; and this was exceptionally convenient for the Czech capitalists and middle classes. Comparatively little, again, was done to promote the all-round economic development of Slovakia, a peasant country and source of cheap labour under the Hungarians—and practically nothing for the Sub-Carpathian Russians, as they were called, in the far eastern tip of the country. It was simpler for the bigger capitalists of Bohemia and Slovakia to leave matters there in the hands of the rich peasants and wholesale merchants.

In foreign affairs the bourgeois aspect of Czechoslovak democracy was particularly manifest. The leading bourgeois parties—the Agrarians, National Socialists (Beneš Party) and Catholics—were vigilant enough about the danger of Germany and Hungary trying to take revenge for their 1918 defeats. Their foreign policy was based on alliance with France. For that very reason and by the same token they were extremely hostile to the Soviet Union for very many years. Masaryk and Beneš, founders of the National Socialist Party, had in May, 1918, by direct arrangement with the Western Governments<sup>5</sup> who were promoting counter-revolution in Soviet Russia, launched an armed rebellion of the Czechoslovak military units in Russia, formed of deserters from the Austro-Hungarian armies. This rebellion played an important part in introducing the White régime of Admiral Kolchak in Siberia and other counter-revolutionary forces elsewhere. In 1919 the newly-established Government joined in the Allied invasion of Soviet Hungary which led to the consolidation of Admiral Horthy's Fascist dictatorship. When the White armies were driven out of Russia in 1920, the Czechoslovak Government provided a home, jobs and subsidies to many Russian counter-revolutionary organisations. At the trial of Socialist-Revolutionary leaders in Moscow in 1922, authentic documents, "lifted" from their Paris archives and later published in facsimile, showed President Masaryk and Foreign Minister Beneš personally arranging these subsidies. In June, 1922, the

<sup>5</sup> This fact, strenuously denied for many years, has recently been established beyond any doubt by an abundance of secret documents from the archives of the President's Chancery, the Foreign and War Ministries, and the Institute of Military History, quoted in Kral, *O Kontrrevolutsionnoi Anti-Sovetskoi Politiki Masarika i Benesha* (Russian, translated from the Czech original, 1955).



Czechoslovak Government signed a trade agreement with Soviet Russia—last of the series which began with the Anglo-Soviet trade agreement in 1921—but refused to establish diplomatic relations until June, 1934, after Hitler had come to power. The following year it followed France in concluding a treaty of mutual assistance with the U.S.S.R. (May 16, 1935). However, this treaty was not to operate—on the insistence of the Czechoslovak Government—unless France's similar treaty with the U.S.S.R. came into play; and because the French Government avoided holding staff talks about practical ways of putting the treaty into effect, the Czechoslovak Government avoided them too.

## PART TWO

## MUNICH

### CHAPTER IV

### REDIVIDING THE WORLD

#### 1. Hitler's Plans

THE rulers of Nazi Germany, as we have seen, had been working for a redivision of the world for years. Their aim was to upset, step by step, the world settlement dictated by the victorious Allies after the first world war of 1914-18. Treaty obligations imposed on Germany under the peace of Versailles in 1919-20, her own frontiers and those of new States set up under the peace treaties, were to be broken through and smashed. A new balance of power, political, economic and military, was to be found. It must weigh as heavily in favour of Germany as did the peace of Brest-Litovsk, temporarily imposed by the Kaiser upon defeated Russia in 1918. And this was to be a stepping-stone to domination of the world: *Mein Kampf* left no doubt about that.

The months between March and October, 1938, in which the conquest of Czechoslovakia was added to the long list of Hitler's previous successes, were the decisive and culminating stage in achieving this balance of power. Henceforth a new redivision of the world in favour of Germany became a practicable and more promising objective.

Looking back over those months, Hitler's lieutenant, Goebbels, declared this more openly than had ever been done since *Mein Kampf* appeared. In a speech at Liberec (Reichenberg) in Czechoslovakia on November 19, 1938, he said that while Germany was disunited, "the great nations of the world got busy partitioning the continents—Africa, South America, Asia, Australia. By the time we had finished with our domestic struggles and appeared united for the first time on the stage of the world, we found that the partitioning was complete.

"Not often in history is the world re-partitioned; but when one great new development has started, when the time is ripe for the goddess of History to descend to the earth, and when the seam of her robe touches the ground, then we must be sure that the responsible statesmen of a nation must have the courage and determination

to grip this seam and hold to it fast. I believe that we live in such an historic hour."

But whatever Goebbels might say about the goddess of History, Hitler's clearly-expressed desire was not sufficient to ensure the re-partitioning of the world in Germany's favour. There were three more essential conditions, at the very least.

One was that Germany should become once again, as in 1914, a first-class industrial Power, capable of organising, equipping and financing a major war. In all essentials, this condition was achieved by Germany in 1929, long before Hitler came into power. In that year Germany reached the front rank among European States in the production of iron, coal, steel, machinery, chemicals, textiles, in the volume of her railway traffic and foreign trade, in the development of her roads and airways.

The second condition was that the threat of revolution should be eliminated, and the unfettered rule of the class interested in a new war of world conquest be established. Economic successes had been achieved by methods of rationalisation and speeding up unequalled in any other country. The strain of this process had already pushed the German people so far to the Left that, when the world economic crisis struck Germany with devastating force in 1930, her ruling classes felt it safer to begin governing virtually without parliament, by dictatorial methods. In 1933, the internal strain of resistance to the effects of the crisis, and of preparations for a world struggle for markets, was so severe that the ruling classes, taking advantage of divisions in the labour movement, established the most dictatorial and terrorist of all forms of government operating in the interests of property—Fascism.

There was, however, a third essential condition for success in a new war. That was the destruction of the barrier to German expansion, and the threat to the flank of any German military operations by land, represented by the existence of an independent and well-armed Czechoslovak Republic.

Without Czechoslovakia the route leading from the Rhine and the Main into the Danube basin could not be blocked, the alternative German route to the Danube basin—along the north of the Carpathian Mountains—also lay open, and no one could close the similar route, descending to the Danube further east. If Czechoslovakia, with its ancient natural mountain barrier projecting like a huge fortified arch into Southern Germany, were transformed instead into a German salient into Central Europe, all three military routes to the Danube basin lay open.

This meant that Germany, given superiority in the weapons which modern industrial technique had been responsible above all for creating— aeroplanes, tanks, armoured cars, motorised transport of infantry—would be strategically enabled to break her way westwards to the Mediterranean, south-eastwards to the Dardanelles, and eastwards towards the plains of Poland and the Ukraine, without the menace of a serious flank attack (except from the Soviet Union). None of the other States of Central or South-Eastern Europe possessed either the high degree of industrial development or the strong democratic internal cohesion which were enjoyed by the Czechoslovak Republic; and consequently, none of them, in the event of war, could take its place—quite apart from geography—as a threat to German military operations.

The significance of breaking down the Czechoslovak barrier was even more far-reaching. It deprived France of her most powerful and reliable ally in Central Europe. She had already lost much of her influence in the countries with which she was formerly allied in that region (Poland, Yugoslavia and Rumania). She now would be in virtual isolation, save for the good will of Great Britain and of the U.S.S.R.

It meant the resumption of the advance of the dominance of German finance-capital towards Turkey, Bagdad, and the Indian Ocean, which was stopped by the first world war, and which directly threatened the British territories scattered around that ocean. Only one real barrier—Turkey—would stand in the way of that advance by land, after the fall of Czechoslovakia. Moreover, the essential difference between the war of 1914 and a war twenty-five years later would be the immensely increased part of the aeroplane and other oil-driven engines of destruction. The overcoming of the Czechoslovak barrier would make more probable easy access for Germany to one great source of petrol, the Rumanian oilfields; and the fall or circumventing of the second barrier—Turkey—would open the door to a second great source, in Irak and Persia, which would be the last stage on the road to India.

In addition to these strategical considerations, the occupation of Czechoslovakia, following that of Austria, and the further consequent possibilities, would also add the great heavy industries of Czechoslovakia and Polish Silesia, the great food resources of Hungary and Rumania, and an enormous new source of manpower to the economic potential referred to earlier.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Royal Institute of International Affairs, *Survey of International Affairs*, 1938, vol. II (1951), p. 11 (referred to further as *Survey*).



The first step taken by Hitler was to try and conquer Czechoslovakia from within. In November and December, 1936, he attempted<sup>2</sup> by confidential negotiations with Beneš to persuade the latter, in exchange for "recognition" of Czechoslovakia's existing frontiers, to sign an agreement that the two States would "in no circumstances" go to war with each other, and to grant freedom freely to "profess and cultivate German nationality". This meant in practice the right to organise a branch of the Nazi Party, and thus to undermine Czechoslovakia from within: at the same time, it meant that she must renounce the mutual assistance treaties with France and the U.S.S.R., and thus stand alone when the process of internal disintegration had gone far enough to allow Hitler to proceed to direct attack.

Although Beneš was prepared to go pretty far in these negotiations (as will be seen later), he would not accept such a patent trap. As a result, in the spring of 1937, a systematic hate-campaign against Czechoslovakia was launched in the German press; and, to the accompaniment of that campaign, the initiative was taken up by the slightly camouflaged organisation of the German Nazis in Czechoslovakia, the Henlein or "Sudeten German" Party. On February 18, 1937, it publicly demanded abandonment of the treaties with France and the U.S.S.R., and the "harmonising" of Czechoslovak foreign policy with that of Germany. On April 27 its M.P.s introduced Bills into Parliament for the compulsory registration of all citizens in national corporations, according to their nationality; the corporations to be controlled by a "spokesman", who would be elected by the M.P.s of that nationality.<sup>3</sup> Thus the unity of the country would be disrupted, and the German Nazis in particular would get the elbow-room for Nazi organisation which they desired.<sup>4</sup> With the prestige of Nazi Germany continually rising in 1936 and 1937, on account of its easy international victories, this programme was a powerful propaganda weapon in the German-speaking districts of Czechoslovakia.

But Hitler's preparations did not confine themselves to political intrigue. On June 24, 1937, von Blomberg, the chief of his High Command, signed the first draft of plans for "Operation Green"—

<sup>2</sup> *Memoirs of Dr. Eduard Beneš*. English edition, 1954, pp. 15-20.

<sup>3</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II (1950), pp. 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Henlein explained in a lecture at Vienna on March 4, 1941: "Although we had to behave differently in public, we were of course secretly in touch with the National Socialist revolution in Germany, so that we might be a part of it." It would have been doubtful, he explained, had they openly confessed their allegiance, whether "we could have fulfilled the political task of destroying Czechoslovakia as a bastion in the alliance against the German Reich . . ." (*Trial*, part II, p. 29).

a military attack on Czechoslovakia.<sup>5</sup> Other preparations followed; but the idea of that attack was first set out fully by Hitler before the Nazi leaders—Goering, Foreign Minister Neurath, and Admiral Raeder, and the generals Blomberg (War Minister) and Fritsch (then Army Commander-in-Chief)<sup>6</sup>—at the conference in his Chancery, on November 5, 1937, already mentioned. In his address, Hitler gave an exposition of Germany's need for living space, and declared that it was "his unalterable resolve to solve Germany's problem by force". He considered that "almost certainly Britain, and probably France as well, had already tacitly written off the Czechs, and were reconciled to the fact that this question would be cleared up in due course by Germany". He made it clear that his aim was "annexation" and "incorporation" of Czechoslovakia in the German Empire, and spoke of "the compulsory emigration of two million people" from Czechoslovakia thereafter.

Publicly, of course, Hitler and his representatives went on assuring Czechoslovakia and its supposed friends that his intentions were peaceful, and that all Germany wanted—as he said in the conversation with Lord Halifax, a fortnight later, already referred to—was "reasonable counsels" in Czechoslovakia, "good relations with all her neighbours", and "consolidation of peace". Lord Halifax had spoken of Czechoslovakia (and Danzig), as well as Austria, as countries where "possible alterations" might come "with the passage of time"—and Hitler did not disabuse him.<sup>7</sup> A month earlier, Henlein had been in London spreading the same impression of moderation and good feeling: Lord Vansittart, one of those whom he impressed, told him that Britain would "work with the Czechoslovak Government to secure the most far-reaching autonomy for the Sudeten Germans"—but would not stand for force.<sup>8</sup> On December 1 Mr. Eden likewise told the Italian Ambassador Grandi that Britain was prepared to support a solution "in accordance with German wishes, namely, on the basis of autonomy—and so was France".<sup>9</sup> As late as March 3, 1938, Hitler was assuring the British Ambassador in Berlin that for a satisfactory solution in Czechoslovakia "the Germans must be granted the autonomy to which they are entitled both culturally and in other respects".<sup>10</sup>

In short (for other examples could be quoted), Hitler used the

<sup>5</sup> *Trial*, part II, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> The text was also quoted at the Nuremberg Trial in 1946.

<sup>7</sup> *Documents and Materials Relating to the Eve of the Second World War*, English edition. Moscow, 1948, vol. I, pp. 38, 45 (further referred to as *D. & M.*).

<sup>8</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> *D. & M.*, vol. I, p. 57.

months after his conference of November 5 precisely in order to test, again and again, whether he was right in his impression that Britain and France had "tacitly written off the Czechs".

For, so far as autonomy was concerned, Henlein had with exemplary clearness stated on November 19 (but in a secret memorandum to his masters, not of course in public) that "it has become senseless to advocate the autonomy of the Sudeten German territory, since it is this very region that has been made the concrete wall and fortified belt of the Czechoslovak State". And the Czechoslovak Premier Hodža—an Agrarian only too anxious to make concessions to Germany—told the German Minister in Prague, Eisenlohr, on December 21, 1937, that autonomy would be "suicide for this State".<sup>11</sup> No one can seriously suppose that the leading Ministers of the British and French Governments were ignorant of this elementary fact.

At all events it was not only the Germans who proceeded as though it was perfectly clear what was brewing. By February 19, 1938, deputies of Henlein's party who visited Budapest had discussed the question with Hungarian Ministers, who told them that they wanted "Czechoslovakia's disappearance from the map of Europe", and that their Government's attitude to the fate of Czechoslovakia "was completely in accord with the Führer's".<sup>12</sup> So much so, indeed, that shortly afterwards Ribbentrop (now Hitler's Foreign Minister) was reporting to the new Chief of Hitler's General Staff, Keitel, that the Hungarian Ministers were asking for military talks "to discuss possible war aims against Czechoslovakia"—which had already been agreed on, but which the Germans wanted to postpone for fear of premature leakages<sup>13</sup>—and possibly for other reasons. Thus we find General Jodl noting in his diary—there is no date, but it was in the spring, as the context shows—"After the annexation of Austria the Führer mentions that there is no hurry to solve the Czech question, because Austria has to be digested first. Nevertheless, preparations for 'Operation Green' will have to be carried out energetically."<sup>14</sup>

The preparations were most meticulous. On February 5, 1938, Neurath was writing to Eisenlohr to avoid, in his conversations in Prague, anything suggesting that the German-Czechoslovak arbitration treaty, signed at Locarno in 1925, was still in force. It might

<sup>11</sup> D. & M., vol. I, pp. 58, 86.

<sup>12</sup> On November 25, 1937, Hitler had advised the Hungarian Prime Minister Daranyi and Foreign Minister Kanya not to "dissipate their political forces" and to "concentrate only in one direction, namely Czechoslovakia" (*Dokumenty Ministerstva Inostrannykh Del Germanii. I. Germanskaya Politika v Vengrii*, Moscow, 1946, p. 23).

<sup>13</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, pp. 152-3.

<sup>14</sup> *Trial*, part II, p. 10.

"prove an inconvenient restriction on our freedom of action" should "complications arise between Germany and Czechoslovakia": on the other hand, if it were denounced, this "would be construed as preparation for active plans against Czechoslovakia".<sup>15</sup>

With the seizure of Austria, the active plans in fact began. At first the German Government sought to allay suspicions. On March 11 Goering twice gave the Czechoslovak Minister his word of honour that nothing was intended against his country: in a third assurance, the next day, he expressed the hope that the Czechoslovaks would not mobilise. The same day yet a fourth assurance was given, this time by Neurath—who, notwithstanding his own instructions of February 5, went out of his way to assure the Minister that the arbitration treaty was still in force.<sup>16</sup> On March 14, two days after these assurances had been given, the French Government promised the Czechoslovaks that, if Germany did not stand by her word and attacked them, France would go to their assistance. On March 24, the British Prime Minister hinted in Parliament that such circumstances would probably involve British support for France. However, immediately after this, when the Soviet Government went further, and proposed an immediate consultation of interested Powers to concert collective measures to halt the further development of aggression and the growing peril of a new war, the British Government rejected the proposal.

The consultation did not take place, but Germany did not attack Czechoslovakia by military means from without. Instead, she undertook a process of blackmail, in which her own threats of military action and diplomatic pressure by the British and French Governments converged, together with the threats and pressure of Hitler's friends inside the country, upon one single point—the Government of the Czechoslovak Republic. After seven months of this process, the culminating point was reached at the Munich conference: and the barrier broke.

## 2. After Austria

In March, after the occupation of Austria, a sudden storm of propaganda about Czech "oppression" of the Sudeten Germans broke out in the German newspapers and on the German radio. We shall see later how little justification in fact there was for this campaign. The

<sup>15</sup> D. & M., vol. I, pp. 48-9.

<sup>16</sup> *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-39*. Third Series, vol. I (1949), pp. 36-7 (further referred to as D.B.F.P.).



important thing is that, directly the campaign broke out, it was supported by troop movements on the German-Czechoslovak frontier. So convincing was this sudden menace that the leaders of most of the non-Nazi German-speaking parties in Czechoslovakia withdrew from their coalition with the Czech Conservative, Liberal and Socialist parties. Some of them took their parties into the ranks of Henlein's organisation, which had begun "harping on incorporation into the Reich".<sup>17</sup>

During March and April, in fact, it launched a campaign of threats within the districts bordering on Germany, in order to break down the last vestige of resistance to its claim to be the spokesman of all the German-speaking population of Czechoslovakia. Terrorism took the form of dismissal, and threats of dismissal, of workmen and employees if they refused to join the Sudeten German Party, processions outside the houses of the Party's opponents, the dispatch of threatening letters, ill-treatment and abuse of their children in the schools, the boycotting of their shops, and even upon occasion, the refusal of the services of doctors.

This campaign was now directed through the German Legation in Prague, which had on March 16 reported steps to bring Henlein's organisation "under close control", in view of "coming developments of foreign policy". Henlein and his deputy, Frank, had agreed that public speeches and their press were to be under Eisenlohr's supervision, and his instructions were to be "strictly observed".<sup>18</sup> So important had the role of the Henlein party become, indeed, that Hitler himself received Henlein on March 28, and told him that "he intended to settle the Sudeten German problem in the not too distant future". The purport of the instructions which Hitler gave to Henlein on this occasion (a German Foreign Office memorandum recorded) "is that demands should be made by the Sudeten German Party which are unacceptable to the Czech Government. . . . Henlein summarised his view to the Führer as follows: We must always demand so much that we can never be satisfied. The Führer approved this view." He was very pleased with Henlein's success on his visit to England the previous October, and asked him to go again, "with a view to ensuring non-intervention by Britain". From next day "you will be my Viceroy", said Hitler.<sup>19</sup> On the same day he made a speech about Germans being "tormented" outside Germany's frontiers.

Hitler was now talking to Hossbach about bigger plans. He must

<sup>17</sup> Basil Newton, British Minister at Prague, March 19, 1938 (*D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, p. 70).

<sup>18</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 170.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 198-202.

help Mussolini to get an African Empire, but for this Czechoslovakia was the prerequisite: "return with Czechoslovakia in the bag", the adjutant noted.<sup>20</sup> On April 22, after a conversation between Hitler and Keitel the previous day, Hossbach put down the "top secret" main points of "Operation Green". Action was to come "after a period of diplomatic discussions which gradually lead to a crisis and to war". It might follow some incident—"for example the murder of the German Minister"—and was to be lightning in character, carried out by a motorised army and complete in four days, to "convince foreign Powers of the hopelessness of military intervention".<sup>21</sup>

The Czechoslovak Government was already under heavy pressure from the British and French Governments to conciliate Henlein, and took no effective action to stop the terrorism in the German-speaking areas. This encouraged the Nazis to take a further step in the direction agreed with Hitler. On April 24 Henlein made a speech at Karlovy Vary (Carlsbad) in which he put forward more forcibly than ever (in the form of "Eight Points" and "Three Requests") the Nazi programme calculated to break up the Czechoslovak Republic from within.<sup>22</sup>

He demanded the complete autonomy of the Sudeten districts with purely German officials, under nominal Czechoslovak sovereignty—which was not to prevent the establishment of a Nazi régime in the districts concerned ("full freedom to profess German nationality and the German political philosophy")—and the right of the leaders of the Henlein party to control all German-speaking citizens of Czechoslovakia ("recognition of the Sudeten German national group as a legal personality"), *wherever they might be*. The first demand meant the destruction of the military barrier constituted by the independent existence of Czechoslovakia, since large stretches of the border fortifications of the Republic would come under the control of Henlein. The second demand meant the destruction of the political barrier, since the setting up of what Henlein called "the Sudeten-German national group as a legal personality", controlled by the leaders of his Party, would mean the disorganisation not only of democracy throughout Czechoslovakia, but of the State itself. He also demanded fundamental revision of Czechoslovak foreign policy, abandonment of the existing connections with other Slav peoples, and "co-operation in a German-influenced Central Europe".

The meaning of the Karlovy Vary speech was well understood

<sup>20</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 238.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 239-40.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 242-3. A summary is in Wheeler-Bennett, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-7.



abroad; but no condemnation of it was uttered by Great Britain and France,<sup>23</sup> and Germany grew bolder.

In May, the movement of German troops on the Czechoslovak frontier became really menacing. The acting British Consul in Dresden reported that they were concentrating in southern Silesia and northern Austria, and the same day (May 19) confirmatory evidence appeared in the *Leipzig Zeitung*. It was accompanied, inside Czechoslovakia, by the announcement of the formation by the Henlein party (May 13) of a "Volunteer Defence" organisation. It was modelled on the lines of the Nazi storm troops, and in fact had been in existence for some time, and clandestinely armed from across the border. At the same time, the German press piled threat upon threat of what would happen to Czechoslovakia if the Sudeten Germans were not "set free", including the threat that "dissolution will not stop at the language frontiers" (*Manchester Guardian* Berlin Correspondent, May 18): in other words, that unless the Czechs handed over their fortified districts to Germany, the latter would destroy their State altogether. The press also abandoned the pretence that the issue was between Henlein and Beneš: it told Czechoslovakia that its military alliance with "Bolshevism" was "intolerable" (the British Ambassador reported on May 20).<sup>24</sup> In Berlin, Ribbentrop on May 17 had ridiculed talk of "Sudeten-German provocation" and threatened the French Ambassador, François-Poncet, with war in which Germany would be supported by "world opinion", if France intervened to defend Czechoslovakia—"a handful of Hussites with Communist leanings".<sup>25</sup>

It was clear that a combined campaign was in progress, similar to that which preceded the sudden ultimatum to Austria.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, on May 20 Keitel sent Hitler a revised and expanded directive for "Operation

<sup>23</sup> On the contrary: on April 29 the German Chargé d'Affaires in London reported that Lord Halifax had assured him of his desire to continue "fruitful" collaboration with Ribbentrop, and on April 30 de Brinon (a friend of Premier Daladier) informed the German Embassy in Paris that the French Government had decided to "put to sleep" the Franco-Soviet Pact (*ibid.*, pp. 246, 258). A visit by Henlein to London, during which he talked much soft soap to Churchill, the Liberal leader Sinclair, Vansittart and a number of M.P.s, produced public comments by *The Times* on his "reasonable" attitude, and private confessions of similar impressions by Vansittart and Halifax; the latter said he "gave the impression of being genuinely anxious for a speedy settlement" (*D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, pp. 297-9). In fact, Henlein had disclaimed any intention of "imposing" the Nazi ideology, dropped talk of the corporate "legal personality" of German-speaking citizens, and even denied any orders from Berlin—although, as shown above, his visit itself was on Hitler's instructions, as were his denials! (*D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 273).

<sup>24</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, p. 320.

<sup>25</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 286-7.

<sup>26</sup> Even Neville Chamberlain wrote on May 28: "I cannot doubt in my own mind (i) that the Germans made all preparations for a coup, (ii) that in the end they decided, after getting our warnings, that the risks were too great" (Feiling, *op. cit.*, p. 354). The warnings came because of Czechoslovakia's mobilisation.

Green", similar to that of April 22—though in it was a warning "to avoid all action which might adversely affect the political attitude of the European Great Powers".<sup>27</sup> Neither the Czechoslovak Government nor the world at large knew that this had happened: but from previous experience they could guess what was going on<sup>28</sup>—especially when, on the same day, Henlein's party publicly broke off talks with the Government on its proposed "Nationality Statute", on the pretext of the disorders which it was itself organising.

On May 20, the situation was so dangerous that the Czechoslovak Government ordered a partial mobilisation, which met with a sympathetic response from French and British public opinion. The more provocative forms of Nazi terrorism inside the country at once disappeared, the press in Berlin became more moderate, and the German army did not invade Czechoslovakia. But the Germans soon discovered that the British and French Governments themselves were annoyed at the Czechoslovak Government's action.<sup>29</sup> After a few days' respite, therefore, the German pressure from outside was resumed, taking a characteristic form in an interview given by Henlein to the *Daily Mail* on May 26. In this he plainly threatened a military attack by Germany if complete local autonomy were not granted to the German-speaking areas, defined as "an almost continuous strip of territory along the national boundary, some 50 miles deep at its broadest". It would be giving the German authorities credit for less than normal political intelligence to imagine that the British and French pressure on Czechoslovakia, which was now (as will be seen later) being publicly exercised, counted for nothing in their calculations.

Now, in profound secrecy, Hitler moved a step further to his goal. On May 28 he gave orders to redraft the plans for "Operation Green": and when it was issued to the military leaders, two days later, it began with the words: "It is my unalterable decision to smash Czechoslovakia

<sup>27</sup> Feiling, *op. cit.*, pp. 299-303.

<sup>28</sup> For example: the U.S. Ambassador in Moscow, Joseph E. Davies, noted in his journal on May 15 a conversation with the French Ambassador Coulondre: "The Czech situation and the German propaganda barrage worry him. It indicates in his opinion a definite and aggressive German purpose against Czechoslovakia. To him the German army 'manœuvres' on the Czech border are definitely threatening and 'might mean anything'" (*Mission to Moscow*, 1941, p. 327).

<sup>29</sup> Neville Henderson, British Ambassador in Berlin, told Ribbentrop on May 21 that the mobilisation was "very foolish", and the next day told the Germans that the French Government had taken "grave exception" to it (*D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 313; *D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, p. 346). The French Foreign Minister Bonnet told the German Ambassador in Paris that, if the Czechs continued to be "unyielding", the French Government would be obliged to "review" their obligations under the Franco-Czechoslovak treaty of mutual assistance. Needless to say, the Ambassador replied that this seemed to him "the proper way to make progress" (*D.G.F.P.*, vol. I, p. 344).



by military means in the near future." Once again it detailed methods for "lightning action"—but, instead of selecting the German Minister as the object of a convenient murder, it stressed another aspect. The "unbearable provocation", whatever it was, should be such as, "in the eyes of at least a part of world opinion, affords the moral justification for military measures". This shows that Hitler was now well aware of the growing sympathy for his demands in the London and Paris governments. The directive further reveals that he was already looking past the conquest of Czechoslovakia. It ordered the sparing, so far as possible, of "Czechoslovakian industrial and works installations", since it was decisive to "reinforce total war economic strength" by rapidly restarting "important factories". October 1, 1938, was fixed as the day of action.<sup>30</sup> "Military preparations all along the line" were thereby initiated, Jodl entered in his diary on May 30.<sup>31</sup>

In June, meanwhile, the orchestration of secret military and public press preparations was resumed, and the anti-Czech campaign in the German press reached new heights. The régime in the German-speaking districts was never described as otherwise than one of "bloody terror", the conduct of the Czech authorities was never less than "bestial", "foul", "monstrous" and the like. The three weeks from May 22 onwards had been a period of municipal elections, and every petty incident at an election meeting, or squabble in a tavern, was made the occasion for new abuse and threats—all the more unrestrained because, as numerous foreign journalists who visited the Sudeten districts at the time could testify, neither accusations nor abuse had any foundation in fact (except for Henleinite intimidation of anti-Nazis). Indeed, Eisenlohr himself on June 9 protested to Berlin about this campaign which, while so obviously contrary to the truth, was leading to a ruinous decline of business for watering places like Carlsbad and Marienbad, which were falsely being presented as in the "war zone"; moreover, such patent lies were being taken by diplomats as "signs of Germany's aggressive intent".<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, pp. 357-62. The German generals had genuine misgivings about this plan, and *Survey*, pp. 145-6, gives a useful summary of their views. But, like other apologists for Downing Street policy, the authors attribute Hitler's overriding his generals in this case (as in others) to his "exasperation" at the foreign press presenting the Czechoslovak mobilisation as his defeat: they even themselves censure such a presentation as "maladroit" and "unfortunate". This version—swallowed holus-bolus from Hitler's own propaganda version, in a Nuremberg speech on September 12 that year—not only ignores all the evidence that Hitler was a cool and calculating adventurer, knowing perfectly well the advantages of simulating madness and "carpet-biting" at times—but also serves to distract attention from the abundant evidence that, on May 20 and after it, he had ascertained that the practical sympathies of the British and French Governments were more with him than with the Czechoslovak Government.

<sup>31</sup> *Trial*, part II, p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, pp. 398-9.

But the naïve German diplomat, who had so recently been treated as expendable in his master's military directives, was wasting his indignation. By these means, a favourable atmosphere of disquiet in Europe was being created for a re-statement of the Nazi terms to Czechoslovakia, in the shape of the "fourteen points" of a Memorandum drawn up by the leaders of the Henlein party (June 7).<sup>33</sup>

The memorandum demanded that a "Volkstag" (Parliament) should represent all Germans within the Republic, whether living in the autonomous German territory (which was to be set up) or not: with the right to take a plebiscite of them, if required.

This autonomous "Parliament" was to have wide powers over German-speaking citizens (including the right to educate them in Nazism, since the Republic's common Ministry of Education was to be abolished, to give them para-military training and to control the police). Composed of deputies elected from the German-speaking area, it was to elect a "President" who would ex-officio be a life member of the Central Cabinet and of the Republic's Supreme Defence Council. There was to be a similar form of organisation for the other nationalities of Czechoslovakia. Thus, under the guise of "self-determination", the programme provided for the splitting-up of the country—and in particular (since this was where the main threat came from) for the wide opening of its gates to Nazi Germany.

Not only did these points meet with no condemnation on the part of the British and French Governments, but a threatening speech by Goebbels on June 21 ("we will not look on much longer while three and a half million Germans are being maltreated") met with no further reproof than a statement of the British Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Butler, on June 27 that he could not find the words complained of in the published version of the speech.

By this time, the Czechoslovak Government was already very far advanced in its readiness to meet what was legitimate in its German-speaking citizens' complaints of unfair treatment. In addition to equality of opportunity in education, in the courts and in most of the public services, which existed for all nationalities in Czechoslovakia, the Government were willing to concede *district* autonomy (freely elected municipal councils and rural councils existed already, and were for the most part in the hands of Henlein supporters) and also control of local police. From June 15 negotiations began with the Henleinites on the basis of both their "fourteen Points" and the Government's draft Nationality Statute.

<sup>33</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. II, pp. 269-71 and pp. 636-43.



But these concessions were for Germany but the thin end of the wedge. As a memorandum submitted to Ribbentrop early in June put it: the Czech problem was "not yet ripe enough politically for immediate attack". If the German Government would "slowly adopt the slogan, emanating at the moment from Britain, 'Self-determination for the Sudeten Germans'", this would promote "the chemical process of the disruption of the Czech political structure". Thereby the "ultimate fate of the rump of Czechoslovakia . . . would be already sealed". Once this question was settled, "it is generally taken for granted that Poland is next on the list". But the later this began to be discussed internationally, the better: too great haste "would bring the opposition of the Entente into play sooner and more energetically than our strength will bear".<sup>34</sup>

Hitler, however, was convinced now that he could rely on the British and French Governments also doing their best to accelerate the "chemical process". He had good reason for this, as will be shown later. From time to time he would continue to frighten them with threatening talk. Thus on June 12 Hess proclaimed in a public speech that Czechoslovakia was created by the "lies of Versailles" and had become "a source of danger to the peace of Europe"; on June 23 we find Goering privately telling Neville Henderson that Czechoslovakia was "an untenable proposition" and that the incorporation of the Sudeten areas in Germany was "sooner or later inevitable";<sup>35</sup> and on July 18 Hitler's personal adjutant, Wiedemann, on a visit to London to arrange for a visit to London by Goering, informed Halifax that, while his government was not planning to use force "in present circumstances", it could not give such an assurance "for all time".<sup>36</sup> In the meantime, due publicity was given to war preparations—the large numbers of men at work on the eastern fortifications, reservists retained for extra training, and so forth;<sup>37</sup> and the press campaign against Czechoslovakia continued.

### 3. Military Blackmail

When the Czechoslovak Government on July 23 made known the first of its new proposed laws—the statute of nationalities—the German newspapers violently denounced the law as a "manœuvre". Henlein told the press on July 25 that "there will be no war *so far as*

<sup>34</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, pp. 420-2. The author of this truly Hitlerian document appears to have been von Weizsäcker, State Secretary at the German Foreign Office.

<sup>35</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, p. 513.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 586, 587.

<sup>37</sup> The British Ambassador in Berlin, in conversation with Weizsäcker, is recorded as having called them "understandable defence measures" (D.G.F.P., vol. II, p. 523).

*we are concerned*", but that he could not be responsible for what might happen if there were no agreement by the autumn. He said he was "restraining" his people, who wanted "annexation to the German Reich".<sup>38</sup> The Germans received with pleasure, on the contrary, the news that, in face of this new deadlock, the British Government was sending Lord Runciman to Prague as a "mediator". A leading German correspondent in London cabled: "It is the first open attempt since the war to revise an essential part of the Versailles Treaty" (quoted in the *Manchester Guardian*, July 27). "One can say that the role of Lord Runciman will be appreciated in Berlin to the extent to which it will serve pan-German aims; but that it is very doubtful if the Nazi leaders will accept a compromise", cabled the well-informed Berlin correspondent of the *Petit Parisien* on August 2.

Events in August provided practical evidence that the correspondent was right. While Lord Runciman in Czechoslovakia was working in the greatest secrecy, with frequent week-ends spent in the society of some of the greatest pro-Nazi landowners and businessmen of Czechoslovakia, the German Government, during the first fortnight of August, mobilised many hundreds of thousands of reservists for "manœuvres", sending hundreds of thousands more to the western frontiers of Germany to build fortifications.<sup>39</sup> So great were these unprecedented manœuvres that the railway and road transport systems of Germany were again and again temporarily disorganised, and great alarm spread throughout the German population. In order to heighten the effect outside Germany, and to make the blackmail more effective, the German authorities began to hint more or less openly at the prospects of immediate war.

On August 19, Goering's paper, the *National Zeitung*, published an article by a former Colonel of the Hungarian General Staff, which was widely reprinted in Germany. The article calmly discussed the methods and prospects of dismembering Czechoslovakia, which it described as "the weak point in the defence of Western Europe against the U.S.S.R." Immediately afterwards, when General Vuillemin, Chief of the French Air Staff, came on a visit to Germany, Goering asked him—with a laugh—whether France really meant to attack Germany if the latter were involved in war with Czechoslovakia. On August 22,

<sup>38</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, July 26, 1938.

<sup>39</sup> General Mason-Macfarlane, British military attaché in Berlin, reported on August 3 that the intention was "to carry out what would seem little short of a partial test mobilisation in September" (D.B.F.P., vol. II, p. 42). Earlier a British Foreign Office official, William Strang, had written to Neville Henderson quoting many details of German military preparations for the autumn, from a secret source (D.B.F.P., vol. I, pp. 610-11).



the German representatives in Moscow, Belgrade and Bucharest (in "private and purely informal" conversations) informed the governments to which they were accredited that, in the event of armed conflict breaking out in the Sudeten districts, Germany would give the Sudeten Germans "every support", and enquired what would be the attitude of the Soviet and other governments.<sup>40</sup> On August 26, the Nazi press in Czechoslovakia published what appeared to be the signal for that conflict, according to the rules of the game which had, after years of experience, become internationally familiar—an alleged "secret circular" of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, ordering an insurrection, and simultaneously a manifesto of the leaders of the Henlein Party, giving their members a free hand for "self-defence", i.e. for launching civil war.

In reality, large quantities of arms were now being smuggled in from Germany, and the police had begun arresting the smugglers. Moreover, it had at last issued an order prohibiting the use of terror, physical or economic (i.e. victimisation), on behalf of a political party. Lord Runciman himself had to intervene, to warn the Henleinites that they were going too far, on August 28; and the British military attaché in Prague presented a memorandum to his superiors next day on German military infiltration and illegal arming of the population.<sup>41</sup> A little while earlier, in fact, the German Chargé d'Affaires in Prague had circularised German consulates in Czechoslovakia (August 17). He warned them that the authorities were looking for evidence of illegal activities by the consulates, and requested them "to destroy at once all incriminating evidence, especially any with military content".<sup>42</sup>

In the meantime, negotiations between the Czechoslovak Government, Lord Runciman and the Henlein party were in progress—very slowly, in fulfilment of the deliberate policy pursued by the latter, as outlined by the German Chargé d'Affaires on August 12: "By introduction of a special exchange of documents regarding its memorandum of June 7, the Sudeten German Party pursues the tactical design of drawing out negotiations."<sup>43</sup> The grand purpose of these negotiations was once more restated by Ribbentrop in commenting on one of the proposals submitted by Beneš to Henlein, which were so reasonable as to take the Nazis aback (August 17): "The answer to the Beneš proposals was contained in the general instructions given to Henlein, namely, always to negotiate and not to let the link be

<sup>40</sup> This was in fulfilment of an instruction sent by Ribbentrop to these representatives on August 3 (*D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 529-31). The conversation between Litvinov and the German Ambassador in Moscow is reported in the same volume, p. 604.

<sup>41</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 186.

<sup>42</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 576.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 555.

broken: on the other hand, always to demand more than could be granted by the other side." He warned Henlein that he would be "pinned down" if he accepted Beneš' reasonable proposals as a basis for negotiations.<sup>44</sup>

The details of the negotiations are not of importance in examining the policy of Germany in these months, just because of the principle of always asking more than could be granted. The important thing was to appear to negotiate, to gain time for military preparations, for arming and organising Nazis on the Czechoslovak side of the border, for making threatening speeches or provoking "incidents" from time to time which had the effect of bringing more and yet more pressure from London and Paris upon the Czechoslovak Government, for winning friends and supporters among Ministers and other politicians in the two Western capitals. This is what stands out from the volumes of British and German diplomatic reports on the Prague negotiations, from July to the beginning of September.

The determining element in this policy is indicated in the most secret preparations of all—those of which a sample is contained in Jodl's memorandum to Hitler, on behalf of the General Staff, on August 24.<sup>45</sup> He asked for the day and hour of the proposed "incident" in Czechoslovakia to be fixed—since it had to be arranged so that the air force got the appropriate orders in time to attack enemy airfields by surprise, in "generally favourable weather"—but not so far ahead that the Czechoslovaks got wind of it. Both the army and the air force should be in a state of preparedness before this, but not knowing why. If Germans were to be recalled from abroad, it must be done cautiously; and the possibility of friendly or neutral diplomats perishing in the first air attacks on Prague must also be reckoned with. There were several other such documents, covering different aspects of the proposed attack.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps the most characteristic was an entry in Jodl's diary on September 11: "In the afternoon, conference with Secretary of State Jahnke, from the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, on imminent common tasks. These joint proposals for refutation of our own violations of International Law, and the exploitation of its violations by the enemy, were considered particularly important." By October 1 a detailed schedule was ready—including stock replies for each case.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 587.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 618-19. A note on the original document (produced at the Nuremberg trial of major war criminals) indicated that, by August 30, Hitler had said he would "act on these suggestions".

<sup>46</sup> Summarised in *Survey*, pp. 283-5.

<sup>47</sup> *Trial*, part II, p. 19.



By September 5, Beneš had drafted his "Fourth Plan", which was accepted by the Czechoslovak Government on that day and handed to the Henlein party leaders two days later. It granted the German-speaking citizens the essence of what Henlein had been demanding—local self-government in all except defence, foreign affairs and finance: its exercise by cantonal assemblies elected by adult suffrage: special rights for the M.P.s or local councillors of a particular nationality to take up the case of an aggrieved member of their nationality *outside* the self-governing cantons of his nationality. Lord Runciman himself subsequently admitted that these proposals really met Henlein's Carlsbad demands—provided they were genuine. As for the Henleinites, they were completely nonplussed. At their meeting on the afternoon of September 7, one of them—Kundt—said the plan had created "an entirely new situation", since it "outwardly and in its essential content covers the most essential principles of the Carlsbad demands". Kier, their legal adviser, agreed with this. Both saw the virtue of the plan in the fact that "the power of the State would become so impotent that it could neither be a stronghold of the Czech people nor a powerful weapon for other Great Powers to use against the Reich" (Kundt), and in fact that "the power of the State can be completely undermined from within".<sup>48</sup>

The moment they had been concerned about had now arrived: if they accepted these proposals, they were "pinned down". It was necessary to act quickly. They were assisted by *The Times*, which had repeatedly, in the preceding four months, suggested partition of Czechoslovakia so as to transfer German-speaking areas to Germany, by plebiscite or otherwise. None of the Henlein proposals had made this demand, and the "Fourth Plan" which had so embarrassed the Henleinites did not include it either. But evidently the British Government was primarily concerned to demonstrate its friendship to Hitler: and the editor of *The Times* had for many years had "close personal friendships with Baldwin, Chamberlain and Halifax".<sup>49</sup> He supervised the preparation of a leading article, which appeared on September 7, and which suggested that if Sudeten Germans and Czechoslovaks

<sup>48</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, pp. 714-18.

<sup>49</sup> History of "The Times", vol. IV, part II, p. 931. He "remained in close contact with Neville Chamberlain during the latter's premiership, lasting three years": while Chamberlain "was strengthened in his own views by the knowledge that Geoffrey (Dawson) agreed with his views and would support it in *The Times*" (Wrench, *Geoffrey Dawson and Our Times*, p. 373). In fact, it was well known in diplomatic and journalistic circles in London during 1938 that Dawson had regular meetings with Chamberlain; and no one doubted that the leading article reflected the Prime Minister's views precisely—all the more because of earlier incidents, to be described in the next chapter.

really could not agree within the framework of a single State, the Sudeten districts (i.e. the mountain fortifications of Czechoslovakia) might be handed over to Germany (under the guise of "making Czechoslovakia a more homogeneous State"). The editorial aroused a colossal sensation throughout the world.

On the evening of the day of its publication, the Sudeten German leaders used the pretext of an entirely mythical "outrage", by Czech police against Members of Parliament at Moravská-Ostrava, to break off any further negotiations with the Czechoslovak Government on the subject of the Beneš Plan. The German press welcomed *The Times* editorial, and greeted the "outrage" with a tremendous outcry, this time less against the "bestiality" of the Czech police than against the alleged "impotence to maintain order" of the Czechoslovak Government.<sup>50</sup> The inference that German entry into Czechoslovakia was necessary, to restore order, was obvious.

But at Nuremberg, where the leaders of the Nazi Party had gathered for their annual demonstration, they were sure that no such entry was yet necessary. True, it was "becoming increasingly clear that the Runciman phase of the Czechoslovak dispute was drawing rapidly to an end" (reported the Nuremberg correspondent of *The Times* on September 9, adding that Lord Runciman was currently described there as the "Czechoslovak Non-Intervention Committee"). Acts of violence by the Nazis in the German-speaking areas of Czechoslovakia and attacks on the police were now a daily occurrence.<sup>51</sup> On September 9 and 10 Hitler was discussing with his generals at Nuremberg plans for the "lightning attack" on Czechoslovakia.<sup>52</sup> On September 10 Goebbels, in a speech at Nuremberg, denounced Prague as "the organising centre of Bolshevist plots against Europe". The next day Goering made a speech declaring that Germany would no longer "tolerate the harm done to our German brothers", and detailing her military preparedness which "sent his audience away with the feeling that Europe is on the brink of an inevitable war" (cabled *The Times* correspondent at Nuremberg). Elsewhere too, the pressure was reinforced. On the same night as Goering's speech, the British Prime Minister made a statement to the press which once again threatened

<sup>50</sup> British Legation representatives who went to the scene of the alleged "brutality" discovered that, in a scuffle between the police and rowdy German students, a German M.P. was struck unintentionally on the arm by a policeman who did not know who he was. The British assistant military attaché came to the conclusion that the whole affair was a "frame-up" (D.B.F.P., vol. II, p. 265).

<sup>51</sup> Report of the German Chargé d'Affaires at Prague, September 11, 1938 (D.G.F.P., vol. II, pp. 741-2).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 727-30.



that, if Germany made war, she would find Britain ranged against her on the side of France—that was not new—but added that, if she only continued negotiating, she could have all she wanted from Czechoslovakia (which was what Hitler needed to hear). On September 12, Hitler made a speech at Nuremberg in reply, which, protesting his peaceful intentions towards Great Britain, France and Poland, threatened Czechoslovakia with war unless she yielded to the demands of Henlein. The speech was distinguished, not only by the insults to the Czech people and Beneš personally, but particularly by the extraordinary and calculated lying about the alleged “torture” of German-speaking citizens of Czechoslovakia, and by direct incitement of the Henleinites (the text is available in Baynes’ collection of Hitler’s speeches published by Chatham House in 1942).

This was the signal for an actual rising on the night of the 12th in a number of important centres. Public buildings were seized on the border, bombs were used, and a number of police were killed or kidnapped. The chief Henleinites fled over the frontier on the 14th, and the next day issued a manifesto over the German radio stations declaring that it was impossible to “live together” with the Czechs in one State, and demanding annexation of the Sudeten districts to Germany. There were open threats of intervention by the German press on September 14 and 15. However, the rising was easily put down by the police and troops, with a total loss of 27 dead (16 of them Czechs) and 75 wounded (61 of them Czechs) according to official Czechoslovak figures.<sup>53</sup> Meetings and processions were prohibited, all firearms were called in throughout the dangerous areas, and the “Sudeten German” Party, with its “defence” organisation, was prohibited (though its M.P.s remained legal). Within a few days the German Chargé d’Affaires at Prague was reporting that the flight of the Henlein leaders had had “a crushing effect” among the German-speaking population, and was causing a “crisis of confidence” among them: local officials of the Nazi Party were abandoning it, local mayors were calling for peace and order, and belief in the reliability of the German radio had been “shaken” because it had been “grossly exaggerating” the supposed “terror” against the German-speaking population.<sup>54</sup>

But now the pretence of negotiations between the Czechoslovak Government and the Henleinites—or of “mediation” by Lord Runciman—could go on no longer (Runciman himself returned to London

<sup>53</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, p. 812. Gedye, *op. cit.*, ch. 35, and Alexander Henderson, *Eye-Witness in Czechoslovakia*, pp. 179–85, describe the rising.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 822–6, 828, 854.

on September 16). The open preparations for war, the bellicose speeches of the Nazi leaders, the rebellion in the German-speaking areas of Czechoslovakia, all showed this. Moreover, in August private negotiations had been under way to persuade the Hungarian Fascist Government to table its “claims” (mentioned earlier) without delay, and above all to join in the proposed armed attack on Czechoslovakia: the reward for this would be the return of Slovakia to Hungarian rule. The Hungarians had refused to commit themselves, but Hitler could have no doubt that they would stake out their claim if he was successful: which would strengthen his assertion at Nuremberg that Czechoslovakia was “manufactured at Versailles”.<sup>55</sup> While these talks were secret, Hitler’s and Horthy’s inspection on August 22 of the new German navy—new cruisers, submarines and the battle-cruiser *Gneisenau*—was not.

#### 4. From Berchtesgaden to Munich

On the night of September 13, Chamberlain (responding to his own fears, and those of the French Government, that Hitler was about to attack Czechoslovakia and that this would mean that France could not evade her obligations) telegraphed to Hitler proposing to come and talk to him about a “peaceful solution”. Hitler, who was well informed about Chamberlain’s attitude, gladly accepted: “Ich bin von Himmeln gefallen” (“You could have knocked me down with a feather”) was his description of his astonishment and delight.<sup>56</sup> In the ensuing conversations at Berchtesgaden, on September 15, Hitler at first threatened immediate war, and brazenly lied about “300 dead” in the Sudeten areas, “towns and villages burnt”, “10,000 refugees on German soil”.<sup>57</sup> But when Chamberlain said it was a waste of time to talk if war was already decided on, Hitler brought out his prepared solution—self-determination, or more precisely annexation without consulting the people, of areas where there was a German-speaking majority (Hitler had already had a letter from Henlein that day, intimating that he was sure, from his talks with Runciman’s delegation, that Chamberlain would propose “union with Germany”).<sup>58</sup> Chamberlain duly accepted the principle, and promised to put it before the British Government.

<sup>55</sup> The account of these proceedings—with Hitler’s remark that “he who wants to sit at table must at least help in the kitchen”—is in D.G.F.P., vol. II, pp. 609–11, 623–4, 628, 651–4.

<sup>56</sup> L. B. Namier, *Diplomatic Prelude* (1948), p. 35.

<sup>57</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. II, pp. 338, 340, 348.

<sup>58</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, p. 801; D.B.F.P., vol. II, p. 369.



The decisions of the British Cabinet at its meetings on September 17, and of the conference of British and French Ministers on September 18 and 19: the methods which were used to force these decisions on the Czechoslovak Government, on September 20 and 21: and the protests against the Anglo-French terms in the three countries, will be discussed in later chapters. But Hitler was not relaxing his pressure.

On September 16, German reinforcements (estimated later at ten divisions) were ordered to the Czechoslovak frontier.<sup>59</sup> On the 17th, the German Legation in Prague received orders to get German women and children out of the country.<sup>60</sup> On the same day, Henlein publicly announced the formation of a "Sudeten German Free Corps". This (Hitler's adjutant Schmundt recorded) was under Henlein, but he had a German officer assigned as adviser, to whom Hitler at a personal interview gave "far-reaching military plenary powers". The purpose was "maintenance of disturbances and clashes". These activities were to begin "as soon as possible", but for camouflage purposes the Corps was to be armed only with Austrian weapons. By September 20 (one may mention in parenthesis), Jodl was recording in his diary that these activities had "reached such a pitch that they may have brought about, indeed have already brought about, consequences harmful to the plans of the army" by causing "rather strong" units of the Czechoslovak Army to be sent to the border. This was not surprising: a later Free Corps staff report in Schmundt's file said that since September 19 it had carried out over 300 "missions", capturing 1500 prisoners and twenty-five machine-guns, and inflicting "serious losses".<sup>61</sup>

On the 18th, also, the five armies which were to attack Czechoslovakia from different directions, under "Operation Green", received their marching orders:<sup>62</sup> on the 20th the French Ambassador in Berlin put their strength at 22 divisions, while the British Ambassador reported that 1,500,000 men had been mobilised.<sup>63</sup> On the night of the 21st, the "Free Corps" crossed from Germany and occupied the town of Aš, while German S.S. and S.A. units occupied Eger.<sup>64</sup>

At the same time political preparations for attack and disruption went ahead. On September 16 Goering complained to the Hungarian Minister in Berlin that his Government was not doing enough: "There was complete calm in the Hungarian minority districts in

<sup>59</sup> *Trial*, part II, pp. 22, 26.

<sup>60</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 825.

<sup>61</sup> *Trial*, part II, pp. 35-6. Newton reported from Prague on the 19th that the Anglo-French terms had "leaked" from the French, and that armed attacks by the triumphant Henleinites from across the border had already begun (*D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 414-15).

<sup>62</sup> *Trial*, part II, p. 23. <sup>63</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 427, 429. <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 454-5, 457.

Czechoslovakia, in contrast to the Sudeten German ones." After telephoning to Budapest, the Minister promised that "the Hungarian ethnic group in Czechoslovakia would be activated to an increasing extent from now on".<sup>65</sup> On the 19th the Henlein leaders remaining in Czechoslovakia (their M.P.s and Senators remained at liberty) were asked "to get into touch without delay with the Slovaks" (i.e. with the Slovak Catholic Fascists who had been in touch with Hitler before) "to persuade them to raise their demands for autonomy in the course of to-morrow"—although it turned out, to the disappointment of the Germans, that the Slovaks "only" demanded autonomy within the Czechoslovak Republic.<sup>66</sup> It was a characteristic touch that at that very time the German Foreign Office was discussing plans for annexation of all the Czech districts to Germany and of Slovakia to Hungary.<sup>67</sup> As early as May, 1938, the Polish Ambassador in Moscow had told the French Ambassador, Coulondre, that Czechoslovakia would sooner or later "collapse like a house of cards"; and Coulondre's impression that the Polish Government was turning cat-in-pat was reinforced by Litvinov's.<sup>68</sup> Now these impressions were confirmed when the Polish Government (which had denounced its non-aggression pact with Czechoslovakia, without apparent rhyme or reason, in 1937) on September 21 demanded an "immediate decision" by Czechoslovakia to cede Polish-speaking areas<sup>69</sup>—thus adding to Czechoslovakia's difficulties and reinforcing Hitler's efforts to break her up.

Fortified with all these preparations, Hitler received Chamberlain for a second conference at Godesberg on September 22. He rejected the gradual procedure which the British Premier submitted to him, based on the surrender of all Czechoslovak territories with 65 per cent. German-speaking population, with the right of individuals to opt for either nationality, compensation for property left behind, etc. Hitler demanded the cession of all territories which he had already determined, with occupation by German troops immediately (made more precise as October 1—already fixed in secret as the day after "Operation Green" began) and with similar rights for the Poles and Hungarians. He offered a plebiscite under international supervision afterwards. In a further memorandum, on September 23, it was added that the areas concerned were to be occupied by September 28, and

<sup>65</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 816, 817.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 841, 852.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 845-6.

<sup>68</sup> R. Coulondre, *De Staline à Hitler* (1950), pp. 151-2.

<sup>69</sup> The Germans' pleasure at this move (which probably was agreed with them in any case) is reflected in *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 862-3. The correspondence between the Polish and Czechoslovak Governments is reproduced in Namier, *Europe in Decay* (1950), pp. 285-307.



only those would vote in the plebiscite who lived in these areas on October 28, 1918—the date of the overthrow of Austrian rule. In order to emphasise the complete surrender which this settlement involved, Hitler based it on a denunciation of the Treaty of Versailles, and of Czechoslovakia as “an artificial construction” which “possessed neither a history nor a tradition”. He further underlined that his terms were “the irrevocable decision of the German Reich”.

The whole proceedings<sup>70</sup> were interlarded with completely false allegations about “120,000 refugees driven out of Czechoslovakia”, “children left wandering uncared-for in the streets or the fields”, “twelve German hostages shot at Cheb”, etc. (the latter accompanied by one of Hitler’s “madman acts” which he found so effective).

While the British and French Governments were deliberating on these terms—first separately, on the 24th and 25th, and then jointly, at a meeting in London on the 25th and 26th—the Czechoslovak Government (which had already mobilised) rejected them. The British and French Governments took some preliminary measures for partial mobilisation. Sir Horace Wilson was sent to see Hitler, and the result of his interviews on the 26th and 27th was only to secure a time-limit for the Czechoslovaks to accept the terms by 2 p.m. on the 28th. The British Government issued a warning on the 26th about Anglo-Franco-Soviet help for Czechoslovakia if there were war. But Hitler was confident that all these measures, which were thoroughly alarming the people of all countries,<sup>71</sup> Germany included, meant nothing except that they were bargaining tactics—to secure from him some act of noble self-restraint which would enable the British and French Governments to present the conquest of Czechoslovakia as really an act saving European peace.

On September 26 he prepared the way for this by a speech at the Sportpalast in Berlin, in which raving abuse of Czechoslovakia and Beneš, with denunciations of the U.S.S.R. and threats of war, was interspersed with assurances that this was “the last territorial claim which I have in Europe”, expressions of friendship for Britain, France and Poland, and of personal gratitude to Chamberlain. This was well calculated to impress: since the British Ambassador in Berlin, at any rate, had freely revealed the same train of thought passing through

<sup>70</sup> Reports by the British and German sides respectively are in *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 463-73, 482-3, 485-7, 489-90, 499-508; and in *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 870-9, 887-8, 889-91, 892, 898-908.

<sup>71</sup> Appeals were sent to Hitler by President Roosevelt on the 26th and 27th, and by the King of Sweden on the 27th (*D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 958, 974, 983). Hitler replied to Roosevelt with a telegram now saying that there were “214,000 refugees”, with “countless dead and thousands of wounded”.

his mind for many months, and Hitler knew from many sources that Neville Henderson was not alone. He followed up the speech with a personal letter to Chamberlain on the 27th (which the Prime Minister received the same evening), arguing in the most reasonable tones against various criticisms of his terms, offering to guarantee the independence of the remainder of Czechoslovakia once the German, Polish and Hungarian minorities had gone, and finishing with an invitation to Chamberlain to “continue your effort, for which I should like to take this opportunity of once more sincerely thanking you”—in order to prevent “Prague” from bringing about a general war.<sup>72</sup>

The calculation was correct. Chamberlain snatched at the opportunity, and telegraphed next day to Hitler proposing an immediate Four-Power Conference (i.e. including Italy). He had already informed the French Government, whose leaders were mainly concerned to get in ahead of Chamberlain (on the morning of the 28th) with an even more eager offer of co-operation against Czechoslovakia—that it should be required to agree (on pain of losing any French support) to the immediate occupation by German troops of “all four sides of the Bohemian quadrilateral”.<sup>73</sup> Hitler had only to choose: and he preferred the British precisely because it involved the public participation of Britain and France in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, at his dictation. Mussolini, who feared that a war might end in disaster, supported Chamberlain in a series of messages to Hitler.<sup>74</sup>

He sent the necessary invitations on the morning of the 28th; and the conference—Hitler, Mussolini, Chamberlain and Daladier—met on the afternoon of the 29th, sitting until the early hours of the morning of the 30th. Mussolini already had the draft of a settlement, which had been drawn up the previous day by the Germans, and passed on to him by the Italian Ambassador at Berlin: and at a suitable moment, after a preliminary statement by Hitler on the usual lines, Mussolini produced it as his own. The draft provided for evacuation of the “Sudeten-German” territory, according to a map drawn up by the Germans, between October 1 and 10 and without the destruction of any existing installations: an international commission (of the four Powers with Czechoslovakia) to supervise the evacuation: a plebiscite to be held in “doubtful territories”, which until then would be occupied by international forces: and German troops to begin occupying “predominantly German territory” on October 1.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>72</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 576-8.

<sup>73</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 988.

<sup>74</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 641-5: the account by Lord Perth, the British Ambassador at Rome.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 631, 634.



After argument about the drafting of various passages, with intervals for meals, these points became the essential features of the Munich Agreement, signed on September 30. There were several additional points, designed to make the document more palatable to the public in Britain and France—since none of those present could have supposed that they would make the “carve-up” more acceptable to Czechoslovakia. Such were the provisions that the international commission should determine one particular zone which was to be occupied, the boundaries of which were doubtful at Munich: that there was to be the right of option for individuals: that Britain and France maintained the offer of an international guarantee of the new boundaries, made on September 19, and that Germany and Italy would join it once the Polish and Hungarian minority questions were settled.

The doubtful zone was determined by the German General Staff, which presented an ultimatum from Hitler on the subject at the very first meeting of the international commission on October 1—which the majority at once accepted. The right of option was never mentioned again.<sup>76</sup> The international guarantee never came into effect—indeed, it was cynically repudiated.<sup>77</sup> The “international commission”—composed of the French, British and Italian Ambassadors in Berlin and the German Secretary of State, acting together against the Czechoslovak Minister—equally simply, within a few days, cancelled the proposed plebiscites and never called in the imaginary “international force”.<sup>78</sup>

Although Mr. Chamberlain made much of the modifications supposed to have been made at Munich in Hitler's terms, as presented at Godesberg, in reality they represented “a distinction without a difference”, and Nazi Germany secured in reality all she wanted. “I think it is true to say that every contentious point was decided in

<sup>76</sup> As a number of writers have pointed out, the British and French Prime Ministers at Munich never troubled to ensure the right of “option” for the unfortunate Czechoslovak police who had been kidnapped by the Nazis in the border territories, long before Munich!

<sup>77</sup> On December 10, 1938, the new Czechoslovak authorities received the British reply to a reminder they had circulated about the promised international guarantee. It was brought by Newton, the British Minister, to Chvalkovský, the Foreign Minister. He said the British did not agree to give a guarantee which they could not make effective, and would be very grateful if “Prague” explained what kind of guarantee it had in mind. They would only be ready to give a guarantee if two other of the Great Powers who signed the Munich Agreement did the same. Chvalkovský said that any form of guarantee would be desirable, and the sooner the better. Newton several times recommended that Czechoslovakia should content herself with a guarantee from Germany alone! (*D. & M.*, vol. I, pp. 336-40).

<sup>78</sup> A full account of these proceedings was already published in 1939 by Ripka, *Munich: Before and After*, pp. 485-95.

Germany's favour”, said Lord Halifax on January 20, 1940, in a speech on Munich. The great objective—of breaking down the territorial barrier which stood in the way of launching a war for redivision of the world—had been achieved. The German press emphasised the triumph.

“The will of the Führer is accomplished, as it is written in *Mein Kampf*”, wrote the semi-official *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* on September 30, 1938. The *Angriff* boasted, on October 4, that a “diplomatic revolution” against the treaties which ended the last war had now been completed, including the destruction or rendering inoperative of the League of Nations, the Little Entente, the Locarno Treaties, the Rome Agreement, the Franco-Belgian Military Agreement, and now the Czechoslovak Pacts with Poland, France and the U.S.S.R.

The *Frankfurter Zeitung* wrote on October 10 that the chief link between France and the U.S.S.R. was now broken. “For years the Reich has asked itself how it would be possible to slip out of the Czech pincers. It was not difficult to see that the surest means was not to seek to escape from them, but to break them. The great historic merit of Adolf Hitler is to have recognised this possibility, to have found the means of realising it and to have taught Germany to believe in it.”

It would be difficult to add very much to this eloquent series of tributes, in which considerations of race, blood, or oppressed brethren play very little part. Much the same can be said of the claims now presented by Hitler's camp-followers.

On October 1 Imreedy, the Hungarian Premier, declared in a broadcast that the interests of the Hungarian minority had been “ignored”. The Polish Government the day before presented an ultimatum demanding the Tešín district, and the Note, Beneš was unofficially told, was backed by ten Polish divisions on the frontier. Poland had been concentrating troops to seize this coal and iron area (through which important European railways pass) ten days before, but had been warned off, on September 23, by the Soviet Union. Now its troops could march in within the next few days. After deadlock in negotiations between Czechoslovakia and Hungary (October 9-27), the German and Italian Governments on November 2 issued an “award” at Vienna, handing over eastern and southern Slovakia to Hungary, with part of Sub-Carpathian Russia. These agriculturally rich areas were occupied between November 5 and 10.

On September 30, 1938, Czechoslovakia covered an area of 54,000 square miles; on November 30, only 38,000 square miles. Its population numbered 14,500,000 on the first date and 9,600,000 on the



second. Moreover, over 800,000 Czechs passed, in the annexed territories, under German, Polish and Hungarian rule, while Hungary got under her rule 270,000 Slovaks. Poland took over nearly two-thirds as many Czechs as she did Poles: and whereas the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia had represented only 6 per cent. of the population, the new Slovak minority in Hungary represented over 20 per cent. of the population.

Czechoslovakia had lost in the process over 66 per cent. of its coal, 70 per cent. of its iron and steel industry, 90 per cent. of its porcelain industry, 80 per cent. of its lignite, and all its zinc and graphite. It had also lost nearly 90 per cent. of its sheet glass industry (measured in output), 80 per cent. of its textile industry, 60 per cent. of its paper industry and over 80 per cent. of its chemical industry, 50 per cent. of its dyestuffs industry, and 70 per cent. of its power supply; as well as 60 per cent. of its famous hop area, most of its wine and tobacco output, and 40 per cent. of the woods of Bohemia and Moravia.

But above all, Czechoslovakia had lost its historic frontiers and the means of defending itself—its vast and costly fortifications and its well-equipped and well-trained armed forces of forty-five divisions (for those which remained, reduced in numbers, were broken in spirit); while its network of railways had been completely disorganised.

One more link in a long chain of German successes had been forged: but qualitatively, it was the biggest and most decisive of all. Neither the signature of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement behind the back of France (June, 1935), nor the unpunished breaches of the Versailles Treaty involved in the reintroduction of conscription and the reoccupation of the Rhineland (1935-6), nor the invasion, under various disguises, of Spain (1936-8), nor even the seizure of Austria (1938), could compare in importance with the reduction of Czechoslovakia to a condition in which it was, in the words of the Berlin correspondent of *The Times* (October 3, 1938), "incapable of obstructing the extension of German political and economic influence in Eastern Europe".

## CHAPTER V

### "WITHOUT WAR AND WITHOUT DELAY"

#### 1. Pressure Begins

LET the reader suppose that in January, 1933, after Hitler came to power in Germany, the leaders of the British Government said the following to themselves, or to one another:

"We think the Nazi régime is a useful barrier in defence of property in Germany and throughout Central and Eastern Europe. We ought, therefore, to give it every support we can. We cannot openly express our admiration for it, because we are the largely Conservative Government of a relatively democratic State.<sup>1</sup> But there are plenty of ways in which we can help the Nazis without that.

"Moreover, the more we show the world that we are encouraging them, the more will the allies of France among the smaller States of Europe tend to abandon her and enter the orbit of the rising Germany. This will weaken the independent position of France, and correspondingly increase her willingness to accept our advice (an old principle among allies in past history, formally set out in volume III of Lord D'Abernon's *Diaries*). We know that in the event of an attack on France, for any reason whatsoever, we should have to go to her aid; but, rather than let her draw the conclusion that she can lay down terms to us in matters of international policy, will it not be better to bring her into such a condition of complete dependence on our good pleasure that, on the contrary, it is we who can dictate foreign policy to her?

"There is an additional advantage in giving, at any rate covert, and wherever possible overt, support to Hitler. He is already a powerful counter-influence to the growing prestige of the U.S.S.R. The stronger becomes the first State which has substituted collective ownership for private capitalism, the more we shall need some such counter-influence. And when the time comes—as in the nature of

<sup>1</sup> The official record of Lord Halifax's talk with Hitler on November 19, 1937, shows the former as saying that in England "the great services the Führer had rendered in the rebuilding of Germany were fully and completely recognised. . . . He (Lord Halifax) recognised that the Chancellor had not only rendered great services to Germany but, as no doubt he himself realised, had been able, by preventing the entry of Communism into his country, to bar its passage further west" (*D.G.F.P.*, vol. I, p. 56).

things it must naturally come—that Germany feels herself strong enough to look for territorial aggrandisement and colonial expansion, how much more advantageous it will be to head her off against the U.S.S.R. than to let her expand in some other direction; when we might find ourselves forced, for various reasons, to take the field against her!”

It has become a pleasant tradition in British politics, during the last century or so, never to attribute to the Government, or to the social forces behind it, any such Machiavellian, or “realistic”, calculations as those sketched out above. However, let the reader consider the British Government’s policy from 1933 to 1938—from the Pact of Rome to the seizure of Austria—and he will find that it could hardly have acted otherwise if those calculations were really the basis of its conduct. And in international politics intentions hardly ever produce results, unless actions square with them. The question of whether the members of the British Government in their intentions—or their instinctive policies—were actuated by what in their lights were patriotic motives, has practically no bearing on the problem at all.

The policy pursued from March to September, 1938, while it had its element of improvisation from stage to stage, was at bottom a continuation of that pursued from 1933 (and even earlier). But the gravity of the issues involved in the disappearance of an independent Czechoslovakia, and the speed at which Hitler felt himself able by now to proceed, left little time for camouflage, and forced the essential features of the British Government’s policy out into the open.

During the first stage of the crisis, when the seizure of Austria had aroused general alarm about the future of Czechoslovakia, the British Government—through Mr. Chamberlain’s speech of March 24, 1938, in the House of Commons—explained that (i) it believed in satisfying “the reasonable wishes of the German minority”. He (ii) said, in connection with the Czechs, that there was “no need to assume the use of force, or indeed to talk about it”. In the meantime, he mentioned a number of cases in which Britain would regard herself as bound to fight—and from these Czechoslovakia was by name excluded. (iii) In her case aid against aggression *might* be granted—if “in our judgment, it would be proper, under the provisions of the Covenant, so to do”. (iv) But he would not even commit Britain to supporting France if she went to help Czechoslovakia against German aggression, as laid down by treaty (although, once war started, “it would be well within the bounds of possibility” that Britain might become involved). As for (v), the Soviet Union’s proposals, made

a week earlier, of discussions with other Powers, “inside the League or outside it”, of practical steps to stop the further development of aggression, Chamberlain said that these were not so much aiming at a settlement as at “a concerting of action against an eventuality which has not yet arisen”.

In the circumstances of the time, (i) meant satisfying the Henleinites, since these were by far the most vocal section of the German minority, and Chamberlain did not attempt to differentiate between them and the German-speaking Social-Democrats. It was Hitler who, by a speech of February 22,<sup>2</sup> had set all Europe talking of the use of force against Czechoslovakia and Austria—and on March 11-12 had already used it against Austria; therefore Chamberlain’s point (ii) meant that no one should talk about restraining Hitler where Czechoslovakia was concerned. Point (iii) was perfectly explicit. Point (iv) meant that Hitler, whom events in France from 1934 onwards had shown to have increasingly powerful agents *inside* that country, could now rely on Great Britain to throw her weight on their side if there were any question of helping Czechoslovakia.<sup>3</sup> Point (v) not only meant rejection of the Soviet offer of co-operation, but also gave the world to understand that the British Government did not choose to regard the Italian war on Ethiopia, the German and Italian war on Republican Spain, the Japanese war on China, and the German seizure of Austria by display and threat of armed forces, as “eventualities” of aggression which had already “arisen”.

The speech, therefore, was a public signal to Hitler to go ahead. As such it was understood in many countries—certainly in Czechoslovakia, France and the U.S.S.R. And already *The Times* on March 22 had given pride of place to a letter from a well-known Labour peer, Lord Noel-Buxton, suggesting that there should be a plebiscite under international supervision in the “Sudeten” area. This idea was taken up in other letters, with attacks on Czechoslovakia’s treaties with France and the U.S.S.R., and suggestions that she should be broken up into cantons.

<sup>2</sup> “It is intolerable for a self-respecting World Power to know that across the frontier are kinsmen who have to suffer severe persecution. . . . It is possible with good will to find ways of conciliation. . . . If one tries to prevent the solution of the problem in this way and use force in so doing, then one day this violence will be returned with violence” (Baynes, *op. cit.*, vol. 2).

<sup>3</sup> This threw a particularly vivid light on the British Government’s efforts in the League of Nations discussions on “Reform of the Covenant” (1936-8) to do away with the obligation under article 16—that Governments “shall severally contribute” armed forces, on recommendation of the Council, for action against an aggressor: and to substitute for this a mere right to decide for themselves (see the account of these discussions in Walters, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 709-17, 771-81).



What the people did not know was that the editor had already received from his assistant, Barrington Ward, a memorandum proposing "the internationally guaranteed neutralisation of Czechoslovakia, which in return would give up its Soviet and French alliances and grant federal status to its minorities". The editor "took it on March 21 to Chamberlain, who 'thought it not impossible'".<sup>4</sup> Thus the course taken by the published correspondence was far from fortuitous. Yet the editor knew from his Prague correspondent on the spot, e.g. in a letter written on March 18<sup>5</sup>—and in any case the British Government's own information unquestionably left no doubt<sup>6</sup>—that Nazi Germany meant "to break up this country" (Czechoslovakia), and that the Sudeten Germans "are certainly one of the best treated minorities, *now*". Obviously, in these circumstances, to talk of plebiscites and federalisation was to delude public opinion in Britain and to ease the Germans' task. We have already seen how in the second half of March the Germans launched their propaganda campaign about the "ill-treatment" of the German-speaking minority, and how four days after Chamberlain's speech, Hitler gave instructions to Henlein precisely in keeping with *The Times* correspondent's warning.

But there was much else in the same sense going on behind the scenes of British diplomacy.

From the moment that Hitler occupied Austria the British Government's first concern was to prevent France doing anything to annoy him. On March 12 it informed the French Government that it was against raising the question of Austria before the League.<sup>7</sup> On the same occasion Lord Halifax began questioning the French Ambassador how his government proposed to help Czechoslovakia if Germany attacked her, since direct assistance would now be "much more difficult than formerly". The French reply (on April 9), agreeing on the difficulty, pointed out that things would be easier if other Central European and Danubian States co-operated—and for this they would need to be certain that the United Kingdom and France had a common will "to assure in Europe respect for international law and the right of nations to independence". Franco-British staff talks were proposed.<sup>8</sup> But no staff talks came. Meanwhile, the British Government again and again—on March 14, 15 and 22—refused to give France any assurance of support if she came to the aid of Czechoslovakia.<sup>9</sup> And

<sup>4</sup> *History of "The Times"*, vol. IV, part II, p. 919.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 917.

<sup>6</sup> On March 19 the British Minister at Prague reported that the Henleinite press was harping on the theme of "actual incorporation in the Reich" (*D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, p. 71).

<sup>7</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 144-6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 52-3, 84.

by the time Chamberlain spoke on March 24, Lord Halifax had on March 22 told the French Ambassador that Litvinov's proposal (for consultations on how to stop aggression) had not "any great value": to Maisky, two days later, he said that it would not have "such a favourable effect on the prospect of European peace".<sup>10</sup> Instead, Lord Halifax was proposing joint Anglo-French pressure on the Czechs for a "solution of the German minority question" which would satisfy the German Government.<sup>11</sup> What kind of pressure? The threat of isolation: if Chamberlain on the 24th conveyed it in a delicate and muffled form, Mr. Newton in Prague had, three days earlier, made it more bluntly in a talk with President Beneš: "I observed that Lord Baldwin had declared that Britain's frontier lay on the Rhine, and that I thought it must be doubtful whether His Majesty's Government would be prepared to extend it any further towards the East."<sup>12</sup>

Then came the impulse of Hitler's speech of March 28, with its talk of Germans being "tormented" on Germany's border. This gave a new zest to the campaign against Czechoslovakia—on both sides of the Rhine. On April 1, Nevile Henderson from Berlin was pressing that Beneš should be made to "yield to Anglo-French advice" (i.e. to Hitler) by granting autonomy to the Sudeten districts and abandonment of the alliance with Russia.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Sir Samuel Hoare, the Home Secretary, had after consultation with Chamberlain and Vansittart given an "authoritative suggestion" to the Czechoslovak Minister in London, Masaryk, that Czechoslovakia should do its "utmost to meet the wishes of the German minority", and should "invite British and French good offices". The President and Government accepted the advice.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, Newton objected on April 2 to any suggestions to the Germans to be patient: "Strong pressure should continue to be maintained from the Reich as well as from England, and if possible France."<sup>15</sup> Henderson chimed in, on April 5—on receiving a copy of this message—that "the crux of the whole

<sup>10</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, pp. 90, 101.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87. This was three days after Newton's report about "incorporation in the Reich".

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75. This was an interesting example of the stratagems of diplomacy. Baldwin's remark made in Parliament on July 30, 1934, had been made to show that, in the changed international situation, "when you think of the defence of England, you no longer think of the chalk cliffs of Dover"; i.e. that the defence begins a long way beyond the Channel. This was after eighteen months of the Hitler régime, before it had "launched out". The vast changes in the European scene since then—particularly since the march into the Rhineland in early 1936—might well have justified a yet further reappraisal of where Britain's frontier lay: except on the assumption that what Hitler did in Central and Eastern Europe did not concern Britain.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112-13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.



matter is the right of self-determination";<sup>16</sup> and Newton's response on the 11th (the respective missions had copies of each other's letters) made it clear that self-determination was not thought of as applying to the Czechs and Slovaks. Most probably Czechoslovakia would suffer "inclusion in the German orbit" anyway, and in any case Germany would expect abandonment of the Russian alliance. The British Government should press the Czechs, in fact, to accept "neutralisation" by giving up its French and Soviet pacts, he argued next day.<sup>17</sup>

The whole world, of course, had recently witnessed in Austria what being "included in the German orbit" meant—and how well it went with "neutralisation". But that did not worry Britain's official representatives. True, Halifax replied that Germany should not be encouraged to exert more pressure. However, his own dispatch indicated that they exerted it without asking him.<sup>18</sup>

On April 19 the first Czechoslovak proposals were handed to Newton and cabled to London. In fact, they went a considerable way towards eliminating the defects in the legal, budgetary and other rights of the minorities as such: but they did not grant territorial autonomy, for the very good reason that the Czechoslovak Government would thereby be establishing outposts of the Hitlerite State on its territory—and very substantial ones too.

But Henlein knew what he had to do—and his masters, after March, had a very good idea of what the British reaction would be. On April 24 he delivered his speech at Karlovy Vary, with the "Eight Points". The Czechoslovak Government let both London and Paris know that the demands were unacceptable. A consultation of the British and French Governments was held in London on April 28 and 29 to discuss the Czechoslovak and other questions.<sup>19</sup> The British side, on the first day, showed themselves very reserved about commitments to send troops to France in case of war, and also about military and naval staff talks between the two countries. When it came to Czechoslovakia, on the second day, it turned out that—for a variety of seemingly practical reasons—Czechoslovakia indefensible, Britain and France unprepared, doubtful whether the U.S.S.R. "could make any contribution at all"—the British Ministers wanted to force the Czechoslovaks to come to an agreement with Henlein at all costs.

<sup>16</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, p. 115. It may be noted that on the same day, Newton reported, after a talk with Eisenlohr, the German Minister in Czechoslovakia, that the Germans wanted "a loosening of the Sudeten German connection with Prague" merely in order to facilitate "the eventual detachment of these areas and their incorporation in the Germanic Reich" (*ibid.*, pp. 116-17).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 139, 151-5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 198-234.

Halifax agreed that the "Eight Points" and the Czechoslovak proposals were very far apart, but borrowing the Henlein formula and attributing it to Beneš, suggested that Czechoslovakia must become a "State composed of nationalities" instead of a national State with minorities. Chamberlain doubted whether Hitler really wanted to destroy Czechoslovakia: but even if he did, he couldn't be stopped. They insisted that pressure on Beneš might produce a compromise; but when Bonnet, the French Foreign Minister, challenged them, Halifax admitted that they would not undertake to join in defence of Czechoslovakia even if Beneš offered concessions which the British Government found reasonable. Daladier pointed out again and again the real aims of Hitler—to wipe out Czechoslovakia as a step to further aggression—and the danger in delaying action until Germany was far stronger by her absorption of Central and Eastern Europe.

However, the British Ministers stood firm against any commitments to France—and possibly they knew that the French Ministers would be pleased enough to have this excuse for avoiding the fulfilment of their obligations, as will be shown later. Finally, the French ceased to insist. The conference agreed to urge "maximum concessions" upon the Czechoslovak Government, and restraint and patience upon Hitler.

How did the British Government set about carrying out the decisions of the conference (which, of course, were kept secret)? First, on the very same evening, April 29, Lord Halifax called in Kordt, the German Chargé d'Affaires, to assure him that when the communiqué spoke of a decision to continue staff talks, this did not mean that Britain was taking on any new obligations; and that he wanted to continue "fruitful" collaboration with Ribbentrop (recently promoted from London Ambassador to Foreign Minister). The same was said immediately afterwards to Grandi, the Italian Ambassador.<sup>20</sup> From this evident anxiety to disavow any new measures of military preparation, the two Fascist Governments could draw the conclusion that Britain continued to refuse support to France if Czechoslovakia were attacked.

On May 2, *The Times* diplomatic correspondent reported that Prague would be advised to accept as much as possible of the demands put forward at Karlovy Vary by Henlein as would be "consistent with the dignity of an independent State enjoying a democratic constitution". But the concessions should include autonomy for the German-speaking areas, and also for the Germans "living scattered in other areas". Negotiations for a settlement "might then become

<sup>20</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, p. 235; *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 246-9.



possible." This was nothing else than the idea of a "unified legal personality" of all German-speaking citizens of Czechoslovakia, directed by a separate governing body, which Henlein put forward at Karlovy Vary and which was a typical wrecking proposal, of the kind agreed upon with Hitler. Nothing of the kind had been agreed upon in the Anglo-French conversations, in fact. But the diplomatic correspondent of *The Times*, the editor of which was an intimate friend of the Prime Minister, could only be regarded as an unofficial government mouthpiece on this question, at such a time.

Thus the world was given to understand that the Western Powers already were conceding the possibility of disrupting the internal unity of the Czechoslovak State—particularly through the suggestion of a special position for individual Germans (over and above their equal rights with other citizens under the Czechoslovak constitution): and this was only to create the *possibility* of negotiations. The policy of leading the Czechs on to successive concessions, by alternate cajoling and threats, and without any guarantee in return, had begun.

On May 4 the appropriate instructions were sent to the British Ambassador at Berlin and the Minister at Prague. Henderson was to tell the Germans that representations were being made to the Czechoslovak Government to give the best possible concessions, to ask them to restrain Henlein and to find out from them what they themselves wanted. He was not to tell them what the British Government was recommending to Prague.<sup>21</sup> In fact, however, he did tell them on May 7 that his Government favoured a "State of Nationalities".<sup>22</sup> On May 9 Henderson's deputy, Mr. Kirkpatrick, informed the German Foreign Office (according to its record) that "if the German Government would advise the British Government confidentially what solution of the Sudeten German question they were striving after, he believed he could assure us that the British Government would bring such pressure to bear in Prague that the Czechoslovak Government would be compelled to accede to the German wishes".<sup>23</sup> The Germans were delighted—but would not tie themselves down by saying what they really wanted. They only threatened to intervene if the "Eight Points" were rejected and bloodshed followed.<sup>24</sup> In the previous chapter reference was made to the confirmation of these threats by Ribbentrop on the same day (May 17) in conversation with the French Ambassador.

As far as Prague was concerned, Newton was instructed on May 4

<sup>21</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, pp. 243-6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>23</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, p. 265.

<sup>24</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, pp. 284-6.

to press for immediate conversations with the Henleinites, with the aim of creating a "State of Nationalities". In his meeting with the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Krofta on May 7, he drew on the darkest colours in which to draw the situation of Czechoslovakia. Krofta would not abandon the principles of the constitution, however—nor would the Prime Minister Hodža on May 11 and President Beneš on May 17. This was very vexing for the British Minister, as his dispatches show: on one occasion (May 7) he actually threatened Krofta that "public opinion in Britain would not tolerate a gamble in such matters".<sup>25</sup>

The fact was, the Czechoslovak leaders made it plain to him, talking publicly of a "State of Nationalities" would encourage the Germans to make such further demands as would involve "complete capitulation". The Germans "wanted once again to be masters", said Krofta. If the British Government's views on the military and economic situation were accepted, said Beneš, "the only thing was to accept German domination with as good grace as possible".

## 2. Chamberlain's Interview

Beneš did not know that he was speaking to a man who, more than a month before, had declared his conviction that that precise outcome—"inclusion in the German orbit"—was inevitable.

But the Czechoslovak leaders must by now have had no doubt that, broadly speaking, the British Government was already prepared to hand them over to the tender mercies of Hitler—or, what amounted to the same thing, to disrupt their territory, their fortifications and their means of self-defence. For on May 14 there appeared in the *New York Times* a message from a London journalist, "Augur" (a Russian émigré, Poliakov), saying: "Mr. Chamberlain to-day, without prejudice naturally to the rights of the principal interested parties to decide for themselves, certainly favours a more drastic measure—namely separation of the German districts from the body of the Czechoslovak Republic and the annexation of them to Germany." The next day the *New York Herald Tribune* published a message from a Canadian journalist, Joseph Driscoll (it also appeared in the *Montreal Daily Star*) saying he was privileged "to shed what can truly be called official light on the real British attitude towards Czechoslovakia". The accuracy of his information, he said, "cannot be disputed". His information was (i) that the British did not expect to fight for Czechoslovakia, and did not think France or Russia would either; (ii) that

<sup>25</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, pp. 263-4, 265-71 (Krofta), 282-3 (Hodža), 307-9, 311, 313-15 (Beneš).



being so, "the Czechs must accede to the German demands, if reasonable"; (iii) as Henlein's followers were "scattered along a long irregular border", they could not be gathered into one solid autonomous area; (iv) therefore, "frontier revision might be advisable. This might entail moving the frontier back for some miles to divorce this outer fringe from Prague and marry it to Berlin"; (v) "A smaller but sounder Czechoslovakia would be the result. . . . Czechoslovakia cannot survive in its present form, the British are convinced"; (vi) Hitler positively did not want any foreigners; (vii) even if there were a victorious war on behalf of the Czechs, their allies "would insist that the Czechs disgorge their alien minority"; (viii) Britain "would like to swing Germany and Italy into a working agreement with Britain and France to keep the peace of Europe. Soviet Russia is excluded."

Only after heated discussions in the House of Commons on June 20, 21 and 27—in which there was much quibbling over whether there had been a luncheon or a dinner, whether a talk was an interview, etc.—did it emerge that these messages (and others) were written after Neville Chamberlain had talked, "off the record", with a group of American and Canadian journalists on the subject, at a luncheon which Lady Astor had arranged in her house on May 10. It took some time for the reports to come back to London, and during the subsequent month the British Government did not attempt to deny them. Thus it was amply confirmed in public (as it was already clear to interested parties in secret) that the British Government, while pretending to act as the honest friend of Czechoslovakia, had in reality accepted the standpoint of the Nazi aggressor; and consequently that the purpose of all the diplomatic activity of its officials was to help him to dismember her. This was behind all the talk of a "State of Nationalities". The effect of the loss of the fortified borders on the future fate of Czechoslovakia was ignored, or rather deliberately misrepresented. And the whole operation was linked with a Four-Power plan to keep European peace—one which, as it excluded the U.S.S.R., could not fail to encourage Hitler's next aggression to turn in that direction.

All this may not have been known to Henlein when he came to London again for his three-day visit on May 12, and cooed like any sucking dove when speaking of what he wanted—local autonomy only, the Czechs to continue to hold the frontier, freedom for all parties in the autonomous districts, etc. It was a programme which he never put forward in Czechoslovakia itself. But the purpose of such a manoeuvre was to underline how "moderate" he was in the face of

"ill-treatment", and the comments of even men like Vansittart<sup>26</sup> ("more reasonable and amenable than I had dared to hope") show he was relatively successful. It was during this visit that the "Sudeten German Defence Corps" was formed: and immediately after it Keitel produced a final revised plan for "Operation Green".<sup>27</sup>

An indication of how enthusiastically the immediate intimates of the British Prime Minister reacted to Henlein's activities, however, was given in an editorial in *The Times* on May 16, which in essence stated, four months in advance, the position taken up by Mr. Chamberlain at the height of the crisis in September. *The Times* said that no limit could be predicted to the upheaval which would be provoked by violent measures—the kind of hint of British opposition, if Germany went to war, which British diplomats had long been giving in private. But the Czechs must be prepared for "the maximum of concessions now", they should act on the assumption that "the majority of the three and a half million Sudeten Germans would vote for union with the Reich", and Czechoslovakia might be neutralised, giving up its pacts with France and the U.S.S.R.

Small wonder that Hitler responded by beginning the concentration of troops on the Czechoslovak border. The Czechoslovak reply—the mobilisation of one class of reservists, and of certain categories of specialist troops on May 20-21—was a complete surprise for the British Ambassador in Berlin and the British Minister in Prague, who did not conceal their indignation.<sup>28</sup> The French and British Governments, however, were obliged to reckon with the new situation, and gave the necessary warnings to Germany, with the result that there was no war.<sup>29</sup>

A significant passage in one of Lord Halifax's messages that day, which was intended for Ribbentrop personally, was that in the event of a war involving the Great Powers, "only those will benefit from such a catastrophe who wish to see the destruction of European civilisation"—a delicate allusion to the U.S.S.R., with whom—if Lord Halifax's fears of war proved justified—Britain would find herself in alliance. This must have spoken volumes to the Nazi leaders: if they were being begged to save Britain from alliance with the U.S.S.R., what blessings Lord Halifax would call down for them if they set

<sup>26</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, pp. 630-3.

<sup>27</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, pp. 299-303.

<sup>28</sup> Henderson even told the Germans "in confidence" on May 22 that "the French Government had taken grave exception to the calling-up of Czechoslovak reserves" (D.B.F.P., vol. I, p. 346).

<sup>29</sup> Henderson had several conversations with Ribbentrop on May 21, warning him of British intervention being likely if France was involved. (*Ibid.*, pp. 329-31, 331-2, 334-5. Halifax's message is on p. 341.)



out instead on an anti-Soviet crusade! But, as Hitler admitted at the Nuremberg Congress on September 12, he decided on May 28 to go ahead with preparations for the "solution" of the Czechoslovak problem in the course of 1938: and the necessary change in "Operation Green" was made by the 30th. As we have already seen, German pressure was resumed very shortly. So was the pressure of Britain and France.

It is worth noting that, on May 26, Mr. Newton reported the impression which the United States military attaché in Prague formed as a result of talks with officials of the German Legation there—that they "had expected a *coup* over the week-end", but that it would have meant war with England, "and for that Germany was not prepared". Newton himself wrote, next day, that "the Germans probably did intend to move against Czechoslovakia last week-end".

There was no foreign correspondent in Czechoslovakia during the ensuing three or four weeks but could bear witness, in the German-speaking districts, despite the local election campaign, to the fantastic degree of freedom enjoyed by the Henlein party. The German press was nevertheless filled again and again with the most shameless reports of persecution and brutality suffered by the population at the hands of the Czechs. The Henleinites broke off negotiations with the Government on May 21, asserting that peace and order were not guaranteed. The British Government at once began to exert every kind of pressure on the Czechoslovak Government to dismiss the reservists whose timely mobilisation had saved the situation on May 21. At this period, too, members of the British Legation in Prague were quite openly telling journalists that "Sudeten Deutschland must go back to Germany" (!), that Dr. Beneš, the President of the Republic, was far too friendly with the Bolsheviks, that the only statesmanlike people were the Agrarian Party, because they stood for a Customs Union with Germany, that the Minister of the Interior Cerny (who gave full freedom of activity to the Henleinites, while prohibiting any counter-activities of the democratic parties) was the real man to lead Czechoslovakia, and so forth.<sup>30</sup>

The negotiations were resumed (May 27) and a few days later the soldiers began to return home. Meanwhile, Lord Halifax personally took up with the Czechoslovak Minister the former proposal about his country being "neutralised"—its status "guaranteed by the neighbours of Czechoslovakia and only taken note of by other Powers".<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> The writer was in Prague, on a journalistic assignment, at the time.

<sup>31</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, pp. 378-9.

A State guaranteed by Nazi Germany, alone among the Great Powers, and by such powerful and reliable guarantors as Poland and Hungary—this was precisely "inclusion in the German orbit". As for the other Powers, if all their obligations amounted to was to "take note" of Czechoslovakia's neutrality (after abandoning their obligations under the League Covenant and the Franco-Czechoslovak mutual assistance treaty), they could be relied upon equally to "take note" of Germany's ending it by annexing the country altogether. The Czechoslovak Government would not, of course, touch such a perfidious proposal—though they did not know that, during Mr. William Strang's visit to Prague, on behalf of Lord Halifax (May 26 and 27), he confessed to Newton that there was no question of a guarantee to such a "rump" of Czechoslovakia as would be left once they had lost their fortified borderlands:<sup>32</sup> and that later (June 9), when the French took Lord Halifax at his word, he objected strongly to any plan "which would require Great Britain to guarantee Czechoslovakia".<sup>33</sup>

On June 3 *The Times* had in a leading article once again announced to all the world that Chamberlain—and presumably the other members of the British Government—stood as before on the side of the Germans. It said that the majority of Englishmen probably agreed "that the Germans of Czechoslovakia ought to be allowed, by plebiscite or otherwise, to decide their own future—even if it should mean their secession from Czechoslovakia to the Reich". This would leave in Czechoslovakia "a homogeneous and contented people", and her neighbours would "lose any sort of claim to interfere" in her affairs (the editorial did not say how that would stop them doing so, nor who would stop them if they did). Such an outcome, it added, would be "rectification of an injustice left by the Treaty of Versailles" (as though these German-speaking citizens of Austria-Hungary up to 1918 had ever formed part of Germany).

This editorial aroused many protests, including one from John Walter, a co-proprietor of *The Times*.<sup>34</sup> He said the article advocated "the cause of the wolf against the lamb, on the ground of justice. No wonder there is rejoicing in Berlin"—and pointed out that the writer did not mention the cruelties that would overtake the minorities handed over to the Nazis, and seemed "to have forgotten all too soon the rape of Austria". The really astonishing event, however, was that Lord Halifax should have thought it worth while to cable Prague, Paris and Berlin, denying that the article in any way "represents

<sup>32</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, pp. 403-4.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 458.

<sup>34</sup> *History of "The Times"*, vol. IV, part II, pp. 921-2.



the views of His Majesty's Government". As we have seen, the whole American and Canadian public had been aware since Chamberlain's interview was published on May 14 and 15 that on the contrary it did exactly represent those views. Of course, Lord Halifax may not have anticipated that this would come out a fortnight later, in the House of Commons! Moreover, on Wednesday evening, June 1, Chamberlain had had another off-the-record talk with selected journalists (British, this time), and the German Ambassador's press adviser rightly surmised that the leading article did no more than reflect the views he expressed.<sup>35</sup>

On June 7—whether encouraged by knowledge of *The Times* editorial or not—Henlein produced his "Fourteen Points": and speeches threatening military action against Czechoslovakia were made by Goebbels on May 29 and Hess on June 12. *The Times*—that is, Neville Chamberlain's—reply was another leading article on June 14, defending Czechoslovakia against the charges of oppression of her German-speaking citizens, but returning to talk of "the errors of 1919" and once again declaring: "*The only question that really matters* (!) is: Do they wish to remain where they are? Or have they a wish to belong somewhere else?" Naturally, such expressions of opinion were not calculated to abate the "violent press and wireless campaign in Germany" against Czechoslovakia which was going on in spite of the negotiations with the Henleinites and on which the Foreign Secretary himself remarked in a cable to Henderson next day.<sup>36</sup>

The whole of the following month sees recorded in British official correspondence unremitting pressure on the Czechoslovaks—demands by Newton appear, for example, on June 21, 22, 26, 28, four representations in seven days—with the British representative playing for all he was worth on the political differences between the Prime Minister, Hodža, leader of the Agrarian Party notorious for its yearning for German markets, and the "National Socialist" Party of President Beneš and the Foreign Minister, Krofta. The attitude of the British Ambassador in Berlin speaks for itself: the Czechs should "get a real twist of the screw . . . we have got to be disagreeable to the Czechs" (July 18): "We can regard no scheme as comprehensive that is not based on a form of federalism" (July 19, i.e. on giving the Nazis of Czechoslovakia a territory all to themselves to prepare as a jumping-off ground for Hitler): the Czechs are "an incorrigibly pigheaded people" (July 20): "the Jews and Communists everywhere" were among "the extremists" supporting the Czechs, and "there can

<sup>35</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, pp. 399-401.

<sup>36</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, p. 485.

never be appeasement in Europe so long as Czechoslovakia remains the link with Moscow and hostile to Germany" (July 22)—and so on, *ad nauseam*.<sup>37</sup>

On July 17 and 18 Hitler's confidential assistant, Captain Wiedemann, was in London, to assure the British Government that Hitler was not *at present* planning the use of force, but that he might if there were bloodshed; and to persuade the British Government to invite Goering to London for all-round talks. The British Government, said Chamberlain to the German Ambassador afterwards, would welcome the proposal, providing the atmosphere in regard to Czechoslovakia were "as favourable as possible": which would mean renouncing the use of force.<sup>38</sup> Lord Halifax went further in his talk with Wiedemann on the morning of the 18th (if the German record is to be trusted): while also insisting that there could be an improvement of relations with Germany only if she could give an undertaking not to use force, "it would be the proudest moment of his life when the Führer rode down the Mall with the King during an official visit to London".<sup>39</sup> Allowing for exaggerations permissible in diplomacy, such an attitude—after Spain and Austria—might appear to be spreading the butter too thick not to have the effect of giving at least some modest encouragement to the Germans. "You shall have the German-speaking areas with the Czechoslovak fortifications", Hitler had now been told. "You can have the Czechs isolated, without their alliances." "You can have a Four-Power agreement to maintain peace in Europe—and the U.S.S.R. is not Europe." "You can even ride through London in triumph", it was now added—only please don't use force. It should be added that Lord Halifax's remark about the Mall is all the more probable because—although the British record of the interview does not mention the phrase—it does state that at the end of the talk the Foreign Secretary asked Wiedemann when *Hitler or Goering* would find it convenient to come: to which Wiedemann replied that he thought it could not be before the autumn.<sup>40</sup>

Evidently, too, some draft agreement on the subject was prepared (as an experienced Soviet historian and former Ambassador has pointed out).<sup>41</sup> The collection of Foreign Office papers contains a strange summary of the Halifax-Wiedemann talk sent to the Germans by Sir Alexander Cadogan (Permanent Under-Secretary of State) through Wiedemann. It mysteriously begins *in the middle*, as it were—"On the

<sup>37</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, pp. 584-9, 598, 604, 615, 618.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 618-20.

<sup>39</sup> D. & M., vol. II, p. 179.

<sup>40</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, p. 588.

<sup>41</sup> B. E. Stein, *Burjuaznye Falsifikatory Istorii* (Moscow, 1951), p. 105.



other hand . . .": and the editors say in a footnote that they were unable to find the first part in the archives.<sup>42</sup> But the part that is printed does contain, in its last paragraph, the statement that "it might be impossible to keep any such visit, especially if it were of an important personage, secret". Yet the rest of the printed text of the summary does not contain any other reference to a visit. One can only assume that this was mentioned in the first section which contained the first part of the bargain, whatever it was—probably not only a record of the invitation to Hitler, but something more which it proved convenient for the Foreign Office to "lose" (the British newspapers at the time were very angry, because they learned of the proposed visit only through a "leak" in the foreign press).

### 3. *The Runciman Story*

One thing is certain—that on July 18 a definite decision was taken to send a "mediator" to Czechoslovakia. As early as April 9, Lord Halifax had first hinted that, in case of necessity, the British Government might offer a "special investigator".<sup>43</sup> This was again treated as a possibility at the end of May.<sup>44</sup> On June 18 he notified Mr. Newton that he was definitely considering the offer of "an independent British expert who would try to reconcile the two parties", if there were a breakdown.<sup>45</sup> At that time Beneš would not consider the suggestion; but in the second week of July the German demands were becoming increasingly brazen. On July 13 *The Times* leading article once again proclaimed that "the wishes of the nationalities themselves ought to be the determining factor, and no solution should be considered too drastic which is desired by an overwhelming majority". That day and the next, the Henleinites certainly proposed some drastic "solutions". On the 13th, their leader Frank told British Legation officials that they wanted the right to maintain an armed self-defence corps in the autonomous region on which they were insisting, with freedom to display the Nazi flag and portraits of Hitler, and to have history teaching in the schools based on the Nazi "world-outlook": while in the rest of Czechoslovakia German-speaking citizens were to have a special status. The next day Eisenlohr, the German Minister, repeated this demand—in the shape of "a corporate status" for their nationality—with a new one: that German should be a compulsory language taught in the schools, with Czech.<sup>46</sup> Evidently the open break was approaching.

<sup>42</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, p. 589.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 401.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 501.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 555-6, 559.

On July 14, Lord Halifax discussed with the French Ambassador in London the idea of sending a mediator, and told Newton to warn Beneš that this proposal might be made.<sup>47</sup> On the 16th, he added that Lord Runciman—a wealthy shipowner, President of the Board of Trade in the "National Government" of 1931 (in which Chamberlain had been Chancellor of the Exchequer), experienced for that reason in dealing with industrial disputes, and like Chamberlain totally ignorant of Czechoslovak affairs but predisposed, as a successful business man, to respect the Germans—had agreed to be an "independent mediator".<sup>48</sup> Now, on the 18th, Lord Halifax instructed Newton to inform Beneš that Runciman's services were offered. He would be "quite independent of His Majesty's Government", and his work would be "by his advice and influence to maintain contact between the two parties or to restore it in the event of a breakdown".<sup>49</sup>

Thus Runciman would have all the prestige of having been nominated by the British Government, without the latter bearing the slightest responsibility for his actions or his suggestions. This was underlined again and again during the days after his going had been made public. In Paris, where Lord Halifax discussed the matter with the French Premier and the Foreign Minister on the 20th, he stressed that his government's responsibility would "begin and end . . . with turning him loose in Prague to make the best he could of the business".<sup>50</sup> In the House of Lords, after the Czechoslovak Government had been bullied into accepting the proposal (on the 23rd) and the acceptance had been published (on the 25th), Lord Halifax quoted on the 27th, and answered in the affirmative, Runciman's own words: "I quite understand. You are setting me adrift in a small boat in mid-Atlantic"—which did not prevent a senior member of the Foreign Office, Ashton-Gwatkin, being attached to Runciman's mission and reporting regularly to the Foreign Office, through the British Legation in Prague, during his stay: or Runciman himself rendering his final report to the Prime Minister!

The word used just now was "bullied". In fact, Beneš on hearing of the proposal on the 20th, "seemed greatly taken aback and much upset" at such far-reaching intervention".<sup>51</sup> But the British Government had a trump card. If the Czechoslovak Government did not accept the proposal, Newton was to say that, should negotiations later on seem about to break down, the offer and the refusal would be

<sup>47</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, p. 559. <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 567. <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 581-3. <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 601-3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 600-1. Mr. Wheeler-Bennett, who talked with President Beneš, writes that he "regarded as polite blackmail the manner in which he had been asked to receive Lord Runciman" (*Munich, Prologue to Tragedy*, p. 81).



published. That is, the British Government would ostentatiously draw its skirts aside from Czechoslovakia and—so far as it could—leave Czechoslovakia politically isolated. So confident was it that this threat would succeed, that Newton was told to crack the whip once more, and suggest that Prague should “bring themselves to request our help in this matter”—with the insinuation that this would have a “favourable effect on public opinion”. Thus the Czechoslovak Government was itself to ask for the poison chalice!

After this, Neville Chamberlain had the audacity to say in the House of Commons on July 26, when the Runciman mission was debated, that (i) it had been sent “in response to a request from the Government of Czechoslovakia”, (ii) Runciman would be “independent of His Majesty’s Government”, (iii) there was “no truth” in “the rumour that we are hustling the Czech Government”.<sup>52</sup> These three barefaced lies are some measure of the spirit in which the British Government was conducting itself in the summer of 1938.

By this time (July 23), as a long message from Prague to the Conservative Paris *Temps* put on record (July 24), the Czechoslovak Government had offered terms which gave the Henleinites 70 per cent. of their demands. The draft nationalities and administrative reform bills established provincial diets, with special rights for the national groups within them, which “compared favourably with”—actually went far beyond—local government rights in Great Britain. The Henleinites, working on the principles agreed with Hitler in March, would in any case have rejected them and asked for more. But after the name and proposed mission of Lord Runciman had leaked out on the 24th, they had official British encouragement to do so.

Then began the “Runciman phase”, characterised, on the one hand, by the utmost precautions to veil in secrecy Lord Runciman’s conversations with the various parties—which might have brought out before the whole world the insolent aggressiveness and unreasonableness of Henlein—and, on the other hand, by public emphasising of Lord Runciman’s friendly feelings for the Nazis, in one week-end after another (or other period) spent at the castles of their titled supporters.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> This had been made public, that very morning, in messages from the Prague correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* and the Paris correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*; but the Prime Minister’s brazen assurance disconcerted the Opposition critics.

<sup>53</sup> Among these were separate week-ends with Zdenko Kinsky and Ulrich Kinsky, who had (as Mr. Wheeler-Bennett records, *loc. cit.*, p. 82) Henleinite storm-troopers guarding their respective estates (August 6 and 13); and Prince Max von Hohenlohe, whose reports of pro-Nazi remarks by members of the Runciman Mission “represented one of the most valuable political services rendered to the German Reich” (evidence of Frank at Nuremberg, quoted by Wheeler-Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 87). It was at his castle

At a dinner given by the British Legation in Prague (the German diplomatic documents record on August 18) Lady Runciman talked to Henleinite officials of the “Bolshevik influence in Czechoslovakia” and revealed her “remarkable understanding for the Sudeten Germans”.<sup>54</sup>

Moreover incidents like the following constantly occurred. On August 24 Beneš submitted his *third* plan to the Henleinites (providing for the “cantonisation” of Czechoslovakia, at least three cantons to be German-speaking: the cantons to be autonomous, security forces would include local police: and many other concessions). The plan won from the British Cabinet, according to *The Times* diplomatic correspondent on August 29, the tribute that it imposed on the other side “the obligation to show the same conciliatory spirit”; the *Daily Telegraph* and *Morning Post* political correspondent wrote that “in the opinion of leading members of the Cabinet, the latest offer of the Czechoslovak Government of a new basis for negotiations represents the final hope of arriving at a peaceful settlement. . . . It is a real and constructive effort.”<sup>55</sup> But on the 28th Frank, who had just seen Hitler, conveyed to Runciman the latter’s insistence that the Karlovy Vary demands be accepted as the basis for a settlement. Halifax, on this being reported, expressed on the 29th his “surprise” at such an attitude, after Beneš’ new proposals, and suggested that Beneš should publish their terms “in a general and discursive form”. When Beneš obediently submitted his draft of this to Lord Runciman on the 30th, however, the latter denounced it as “a nine-page memorandum covered with bolt-holes and qualifications”: and on the 31st Halifax, switching round completely, attacked Beneš in a cable to Newton as “playing fast and loose”—urging extreme pressure on Beneš once again!<sup>56</sup>

It is true that Kundt also completely changed his attitude that day,

that Runciman twice met Henlein. The Czechoslovak Minister in London, talking to Sir Alexander Cadogan on April 5, had told him “that it was precisely the aristocracy that had always most shamefully blackened our State and that their (the British) Ambassador in Berlin received all his information unfavourable to us from this source” (*D. & M.*, vol. I, p. 104). Thus, if Lord Runciman did not know what he was doing, Mr. Ashton-Gwatkin certainly did.

<sup>54</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 593.

<sup>55</sup> The German Chargé d’Affaires in Prague, on the 30th, reported that Frank had admitted that the proposals “could not be rejected out of hand”, and Kundt had said that “their realisation could in actual fact mean the fulfilment of the eight Carlsbad demands” (*ibid.*, pp. 660–1). The German Chargé d’Affaires in London, on the same day, said he had heard that day “from the best British source” that the Cabinet had “unanimously agreed that they corresponded largely to the Carlsbad demands” (*ibid.*, p. 661).

<sup>56</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 177, 180, 193.



in a talk with Runciman on Beneš' draft—no doubt because he, too, had belatedly discovered Hitler's attitude.<sup>57</sup>

On September 1, Henlein went to see Hitler to show him the latest Beneš plan, at Runciman's request, and to ask him to be good enough to approve of continued negotiations. Newton expressed the opinion that this must lead gradually to full British support of the Karlovy Vary proposals—"but I believe this to be inevitable".<sup>58</sup> Needless to say, Hitler told Henlein on the 2nd to continue with the pressure for the full demands: though Henlein watered this down, in talking with Ashton-Gwatkin two days later, to saying that there was a "possible basis" for discussions in the Beneš plan.<sup>59</sup> What was more to the point, the other Henleinite leaders had on the 2nd, at a meeting with Beneš, rejected the plan—or rather, introduced such amendments to it as would, in Beneš' opinion, stated to Newton, "amount to destruction" of the Czechoslovak State. However, they agreed to resume negotiations on September 5, after Henlein returned.<sup>60</sup>

Without waiting for Henlein's return, however, the British representatives had returned to "extreme pressure" on Beneš. On September 2 Runciman told him that "if it came to a choice between the Carlsbad programme or war, he should be under no illusion as to what the British choice would be". On September 3 Newton told Beneš that his plan—so recently approved by the British Government—was "scanty and unconvincing" (!) and warned him that concessions now should go *beyond* the Karlovy Vary points, if necessary! It behoved Beneš "to make all sacrifices necessary to preserve the existence of his country", Runciman instructed him.<sup>61</sup> Well might Beneš have repeated to them what Newton had reported to his chiefs as Czechoslovak opinion a month before—that "it is a question of how the Western Powers can save their own skins at the expense of the Czechs".<sup>62</sup> This was a long way from the "dignity of an independent State enjoying a democratic constitution" which the Anglo-French conversations of April 28 had promised. The difference had been created by the threat of German violence.

However, the Czechoslovak Government once again yielded. On September 4 Beneš secured from the reluctant Henleinite leaders—by asking them to dictate to him what they wanted, and writing it down as they dictated—a statement of their full demands.<sup>63</sup> The next

<sup>57</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 198-9.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 659-60.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>63</sup> As stated by Beneš to Gedyce, Vienna correspondent of the *Daily Herald* (published by that paper on October 8, 1945).

day he worked with Runciman, who had prepared his own "plan" (practically accepting the principle of nationalities having a "corporate existence", wherever their members were, on which the Nazis were insisting). By the evening of the 5th the "Fourth Plan" had been worked out and accepted by the Czechoslovak Government, despite its admission of territorial autonomy which—in those circumstances—infallibly meant that Hitler's stage-by-stage conquest of the country was as certain as the conquest of Austria. Beneš told Runciman on the 6th that this plan "amounted to capitulation, and would in future years be regretted by Great Britain and France".<sup>64</sup>

While the details of the plan were not revealed, some of its guiding principles were: and its origin was not a secret for the world. "It was on the pressing advice of British diplomacy that the Government of Prague has made this new sacrifice to peace", reported the Prague correspondent of the *Temps* (September 8). "The British Legation in Prague has apparently been exerting great pressure on the Czechs during the last few days", cabled the Prague correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*. The Deputy Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia, the Social-Democrat Bechyně, said that the plan had been adopted "under extraordinary pressure by the foreign friends of Czechoslovakia". "Both London and Paris have given the plan their blessing and advised both sides to agree on it", the Prague correspondent of *The Times* cabled to his newspaper on September 6.

#### 4. A "Times" Editorial

But there were decisive influences, on both sides of the North Sea, which had no intention of allowing the two sides in Czechoslovakia to agree on it. Already, as early as the 6th, "diplomatic circles" in London were questioning if Hitler would accept anything less than the "fundamental demand" for the full freedom of application of the Nazi doctrine in the border (Sudeten) districts, reported the *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* (September 7). Their views found authoritative and startling expression the same morning in a notorious editorial in *The Times* to which reference has already been made. While admitting that the Beneš Plan was very far-reaching, it said that if the "Sudeten Germans" were found to be "not at ease" within the Czechoslovak Republic, it might be worth while for the Czechoslovak Government "to consider whether they should exclude altogether the project, which has found favour in some quarters, of

<sup>64</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 254.



making Czechoslovakia a more homogeneous State by the secession of that fringe of an alien population who are contiguous to the nation with which they are united by race. . . . The advantages to Czechoslovakia of becoming a homogeneous State might conceivably outweigh the obvious disadvantages of losing the Sudeten German districts of the borderland."

The significance of such a statement by the known organ of the Prime Minister's friends—its general drift coinciding, too, with that of the Chamberlain interview of May 10<sup>65</sup>—could be judged, accurately enough, by the welcome which it met in Germany, Italy and Japan, and the anger it aroused in Britain and many other countries. The *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* expressed a widely-felt view on the other side when it wrote in an editorial the next day: "No more sinister blow could have been struck at the chances of a settlement." In reality, as will have been seen, there had been no chances of any settlement except one 100 per cent. favourable to Hitler, so far as the British Government could help it, for months past. For the record, it should be mentioned that the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* supported *The Times*: most other newspapers attacked it.

Thereafter events took the now regular course. The fate of the Fourth Plan was described in the preceding chapter. The "providential" incident at Moravská-Ostrava, mentioned earlier, gave the Henleinites the suitable pretext for breaking off negotiations on the new plan. The German press redoubled its ridicule of the plan and its vituperation of the Czechoslovak Government. In private, the British Government continued its policy of restraining France from renewing its commitments to Czechoslovakia. On September 9, while instructing Henderson to warn the German Government that Britain "could not stand aside" if there were a general conflict precipitated by "recourse to force", Lord Halifax refused the French Ambassador's request for a joint warning to Germany, saying he had "never been able to feel any sympathy" for the argument that, if aggression were allowed to pass unresisted now, their turn would come next—this was an argument "in favour of a certain war now, against the

<sup>65</sup> The German Chargé d'Affaires in London reported to his Government that it was probably inspired by Chamberlain (*D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 723). While this may not be literally true—the historians of *The Times* make an unknown leader-writer who drafted the article, and the editor who revised and passed it, directly responsible (*op. cit.*, pp. 929-32)—it is perfectly clear that the editor, a constant associate of Chamberlain's, on this occasion precisely reflected his views. Moreover, in a letter to Col. Astor (co-proprietor of *The Times* with John Walter), a week later, the editor wrote that "the Secretary of State (Halifax), who was lunching with me next day, did not seem at all to dissent from my views himself" (*ibid.*, p. 935).

possibility of war, perhaps in more unfavourable conditions, later" (*D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 276, 277-8). Even when, on the 10th, the French Foreign Minister told the British Ambassador in Paris that, if there were an attack on Czechoslovakia, France would mobilise, and asked what Britain would do, Halifax replied (on the 12th) that the British Government "are unable to make precise statements of the character of their future action, or the time at which it would be taken, in circumstances that they cannot at present foresee".<sup>66</sup>

In the midst of this, and of inspired rumours in the British newspapers of warnings to Hitler, the British Cabinet met during the week-end of September 10-11, the United States Ambassador, Mr. Attlee, Mr. Winston Churchill and Mr. Eden being demonstratively called in for consultation at various times. The upshot of it all was a statement made by the Prime Minister himself to lobby journalists, for publication as from "an authoritative source", in the newspapers on Monday morning, September 12.<sup>67</sup> This statement made even more certain the fate of Czechoslovakia, so far as the British Government could influence it.

The statement proclaimed the Beneš plan (like its predecessors) to be "a basis of negotiation"—instead of the uttermost limit of concession which it had been declared to be hitherto. It might be "modified to some extent"—which was a clear indication that the British Government accepted the possibility of either separating the border territories from Czechoslovakia, or granting the Germans "corporative autonomy", or some other modification carrying the concessions beyond the limit of Czechoslovak security. Lord Runciman was still available to conduct the necessary negotiations, ran the statement. There was no justification for the use of force. If force were used, it might involve France, and in that case Germany should not count on Britain keeping out of the struggle.<sup>68</sup>

Briefly, the significance of the statement was that if Hitler would only refrain from giving battle, the British Government undertook to present him with all he wanted of Czechoslovakia—"on a silver plate", as an American journalist remarked at Geneva. There, on the occasion of the League Assembly, the representatives of fifty States were, for want of other interesting occupation, engaged in endless and uneasy speculation as to what might happen to them, in their

<sup>66</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 303.

<sup>67</sup> Chamberlain himself revealed that it was he who had made this statement—although of course the fact was widely known by then—in the House of Commons on September 28.

<sup>68</sup> Full text reproduced in *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 680-2.



turn, when Great Britain needed small change for her dealings with Hitler, Mussolini or Japan.<sup>69</sup>

The final stage, that of the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, was now reached. Under the impression of Hitler's speech on the 12th, and of the outbreaks in the border districts organised with the help of storm troopers and police formations from across the border, the British Cabinet met in repeated sessions on September 13 and 14: on the night of the 13th Chamberlain cabled to Hitler, and informed the Cabinet next morning. On September 14, a Downing Street communiqué announced that he was going to Berchtesgaden, "with a view to trying to find a peaceful solution". He came back with plans for the separation of the Sudeten districts, irrespective of the fortifications situated thereon.

It is not unimportant that the Cabinet had before it, on September 16 and 17, not only the Prime Minister's report of what Hitler wanted but also Lord Runciman's recommendations—and the reader will not be surprised after all the foregoing to find the two coinciding in all essentials. Runciman proposed (*D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 675-9) that all frontier districts where the "Sudeten population" (i.e. German-speaking citizens of Czechoslovakia, large numbers of whom were not Nazis) were in "an important majority" should be transferred at once, without plebiscite, to Germany. The remainder should have local autonomy, but in addition "a representative of the Sudeten German people" (after the Sudeten borderland had gone!) "should have a permanent seat in the Czechoslovak Cabinet". By this means Runciman smuggled in the principles of "corporate national entity" and the national "spokesman", on which the Henleinites had been insisting—and in addition made certain that the future weakened Czechoslovakia should have its Seyss-Inquart too! As though to underline this point, Runciman proposed that "parties and persons" who had been "deliberately encouraging a policy antagonistic to Czechoslovakia's neighbours" should have their "agitations" forbidden—and if necessary prohibited by law. In other words, anti-Nazi parties—whether Liberal, Socialist or Communist, and there were several to which Runciman's words would apply, to a greater or less degree—should be closed down. Moreover, Czechoslovakia should "remodel" her foreign relations—to assure her neighbours that she would "in no circumstances" attack them, or join any aggressive action against them "arising from obligations

<sup>69</sup> Lord Cecil had already made in semi-private the remark which he later put in print (*A Great Experiment*, 1941, p. 306), and I heard it more than once at Geneva in September: "Paying Danegeld is usually bad enough. But it is far worse if the funds are taken from someone else."

to other States". In plainer language, the pacts of mutual assistance against aggression with France and the Soviet Union should be made null and void—and not only the pacts: the League of Nations Covenant provided just another such obligation, and this meant that Czechoslovakia should leave the League, like Germany, or reduce her membership to a fiction, like Hungary.

Dismemberment, reduction to impotence, nazification from within as the preliminary to annexation by Germany—such were the proposals of the "mediator" Runciman, running ahead even of Hitler's demands at the time. They were, of course, a powerful reinforcement for Chamberlain in the British Cabinet discussions. In these (according to reports) there was opposition on principle from some Ministers to some points of the Hitler-Runciman proposals; but as they did not press their opposition to the practical conclusion of resignation, their opposition was of no account, and the proposals were endorsed.

Discussions then followed with Daladier and Bonnet on the 18th. By this time, as described elsewhere, all kinds of threatening preparations were being ostentatiously made in Germany, and the German press was full of the most vile abuse of, and savage menaces against, the Czechs. Nevertheless, the Czechoslovak Government was requested by both Governments to postpone the mobilisation it had intended to proclaim.<sup>70</sup>

The French Ministers agreed without much difficulty to the detachment of the border regions, securing only a face-saving promise to Czechoslovakia of a "general guarantee" of the new frontiers, in consideration of her abandoning existing treaties. No one discussed how such "guarantees" could be put into effect, or what likelihood there was of Powers who would not fulfil their obligations when Czechoslovakia was well-armed and fortified keeping their promises when she was defenceless against any strong invader. Both Cabinets discussed the terms proposed on the 19th, and after some opposition accepted them. It is noteworthy that the plans were endorsed by both the British and French Governments, without being submitted to Parliament in either case.<sup>71</sup> They were then presented to the Czechoslovaks later that day. When the latter on the evening of September 20 rejected the terms, and offered to submit to arbitration under the German-Czechoslovak treaty of October 1925 (the Germans had only a few months ago agreed that it was still in force), the British Minister

<sup>70</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 372.

<sup>71</sup> Chamberlain on the 20th refused a request from Mr. Attlee, as leader of the Opposition, for an immediate meeting of Parliament.



asked for authority to "deliver a kind of ultimatum to President Beneš on Wednesday (September 21)", because then "he and his government will feel able to bow to *force majeure*".<sup>72</sup> This was given him, and accordingly the British and French ministers in Prague forced themselves upon the President of the Republic in the small hours of the morning, to insist on withdrawal of the Czechoslovak refusal; and—by direction of Halifax—Newton warned the President that, if the terms were rejected, the Czechoslovak Government "must of course be free to take any action that they think appropriate to meet the situation that may thereafter arise",<sup>73</sup> one of the traditional diplomatic formulae for threatening to leave a country in the lurch. A different formula—that there would arise "a situation for which the British Government could take no responsibility"—was produced by Earl Stanhope in the House of Lords on October 5: but it meant the same thing. Moreover, Beneš asked for time to consult his Government, promising the reply by mid-day (by 6.30 a.m. Hodža had unofficially telephoned his acceptance to Newton)<sup>74</sup>—and already at mid-day Newton was warning that, if there were no reply at once, the British Government "would not be willing to accept any responsibility for the consequences".<sup>75</sup>

Under this severe pressure, reinforced by the explicit threat of the French Government that it would not fulfil its treaty obligations, the Czechoslovak Government surrendered.

The Czechoslovak acceptance was notified at 5 p.m. on the 21st, and next morning Chamberlain left by air for his second meeting with Hitler, at Godesberg on the Rhine, to report his success.

The process repeated itself up to the end. When Mr. Chamberlain arrived at Godesberg, he appealed for orderliness to "everyone concerned": in Parliament, on the 28th, he admitted what was the general interpretation—that this was an appeal to the Czechoslovak Government, not to Henlein's "volunteers", who were daily raiding Czechoslovak posts from over the border. And this explains why, when faced with Hitler's falsehoods about Czech "terror" against the German-speaking population of the regions it was proposed to detach, Chamberlain actually proposed that the Henleinites themselves should be charged to keep order, perhaps under neutral supervision, until the transfer was completed.

However, the point of Hitler's demand was that the transfer itself should take place immediately, in the shape of occupation by the German army, without destruction of fortifications, without any

<sup>72</sup> D.B.F.P., p. 425.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 438.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 438-9.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 440.

withdrawal of State or private property and without giving those who objected any opportunity to leave except in disorderly flight—thus raising the prestige of German armed might. He had the maps all ready (and in secret, the police, Gestapo and other "civil" administration).

An exchange of letters between Chamberlain and Hitler the following day<sup>76</sup> revealed that the British Prime Minister was ready to drop everything he had promised to the Czechs—protection of private persons, careful delimitation of the new frontiers by an international commission *before* cession, time for them to arrange exchange of population—and to accept Hitler's new demands (immediate satisfaction of Polish and Hungarian claims, exclusion of Czech settlers since 1918 from the proposed plebiscite), providing only that the German army did not march in immediately.

It was only "an unnecessary display of force" that Chamberlain objected to, and only the dismemberment and disarmament of Czechoslovakia "in an orderly fashion and free from the threat of force" that he wanted. For that reason, on the evening of the 23rd, the British Government, with the French, withdrew its advice to the Czechoslovak Government not to mobilise. And for that reason, too, when at a second interview the same evening, Hitler made the "concession" of postponing evacuation of the border districts from September 28 to October 1, Chamberlain overcame his disappointment and promised to transmit the demands to Prague. This time, however, he underlined that the British Government was acting "solely as an intermediary" and not insisting on acceptance.

However, it is clear that in fact, in the British Cabinet on the 24th and 25th, Chamberlain attempted to persuade his colleagues to accept the Godesberg terms: and he was backed by messages like those from Phipps, the British Ambassador at Paris, on the 24th, that "all that is best in France is against war", and from Henderson in Berlin on the 25th, demanding an ultimatum to the Czechs to accept the plan "or forfeit claims to further support from the Western Powers" (the word "further" was probably unintentional humour).<sup>77</sup> Indeed, Chamberlain's own first impulse was to throw responsibility on to the Czechoslovak Government. When he was asked, on the night of the 23rd, if the situation were hopeless, he replied: "I would not like to say that. It is up to the Czechs."<sup>78</sup>

<sup>76</sup> D.B.F.P., pp. 482-3, 485-7.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 509-13, 515-16.

<sup>78</sup> Exchange message, reproduced in *The Times*, September 24—"It was adding insult to injury", wrote a familiar of Tory Cabinet Ministers (Thomas Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 410).



The Godesberg proposals were only rejected after "long and anxious discussions" in the British Cabinet (Mr. Duff Cooper's speech in the House of Commons on October 3). Duff Cooper himself, First Lord of the Admiralty, threatened resignation at one point: and it has been asserted that others like Halifax changed their minds.<sup>79</sup> But the decisive event was the Czechoslovak Government's rejection, the text of which reached Downing Street on the afternoon of the 25th. This made the possibility of both France and Britain being drawn in, should Hitler attack, a real one. All the arguments about their military weakness were repeated at a meeting of French and British Ministers on the evening of the 25th and the morning of the 26th—in which Chamberlain and Halifax were reinforced by two other members of the Inner Cabinet, wholehearted sympathisers with their policy: Simon and Hoare. Chamberlain did his best to frighten the French by pointed questions about their capacity to defend themselves, the state of the French aircraft industry, and the prospects of "a rain of bombs on Paris": he also referred to "very disturbing news about the probable Russian attitude", which he said had been received. At a private meeting with Daladier and General Gamelin, chief of the French General Staff, early the following morning, Mr. Chamberlain received a more positive picture.<sup>80</sup> But he informed them (and later the full meeting) that he was sending Sir Horace Wilson (the Government's chief industrial adviser, who had accompanied him to Berchtesgaden) with a final warning and appeal to Hitler. This was approved by both sides.<sup>81</sup>

### 5. *The Great Manœuvre*

The French and British Ministers exchanged guarantees of mutual support on September 26, in the event of Czechoslovakia being attacked: and Britain called up anti-aircraft and coast defence units. The same evening a statement was issued from the Foreign Office—on the initiative of Winston Churchill (who had seen Chamberlain and Halifax earlier in the day) and submitted by the head of the Press Department

<sup>79</sup> E.g. Wheeler-Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 140. Lord Halifax, in his own reminiscences, gives no direct hint of this.

<sup>80</sup> Published British official documents contain no record of this conversation. But Gamelin's notes show that he pointed out to Chamberlain that (i) France would start with nearly a hundred divisions, (ii) Germany, while enjoying air superiority, had an imperfect and incomplete army and was short of petrol, (iii) Czechoslovakia had thirty divisions, fully trained, at her fortifications to face a maximum of forty German divisions. He was also able to add that that morning, in reply to an enquiry of his own, his chief of staff had had a message from Voroshilov, Soviet Defence Minister, through the Soviet military attaché in Paris, that very large Soviet forces were ready to attack (Gamelin, *Servir*, vol. II, 1946, pp. 350-2).

<sup>81</sup> An account of the Anglo-French conference is in the British documents, pp. 520-41.

to Halifax personally—stating that, if Germany attacked Czechoslovakia, France must come to her help, "and Great Britain and Russia will certainly stand by France".<sup>82</sup>

But this statement was issued without the knowledge of, or consultation with, the Soviet Government (Litvinov at Geneva told the writer this without hesitation). The first and only approach to the U.S.S.R. about Czechoslovakia since March—at Moscow on September 2—had produced definite Soviet propositions for immediate consultation which had been ignored (as a later chapter will show). Consequently the statement was merely a gambler's or poker move—to talk about Soviet co-operation, without any intention of procuring it, but in the hope of impressing Hitler. That this was so, is confirmed (for once) by the French Foreign Minister at the time, who recorded that Phipps, the British Ambassador, told him to treat the statement only as an attempt to impress Hitler that he could get all he wanted by negotiation.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, this was the whole point of Chamberlain's letter to Hitler, presented by Wilson the same evening. And there were big inducements offered—an Anglo-German agreement aimed at "improving the economic position all round", and for the two countries to act "as bulwarks against disruption, particularly from the East".<sup>84</sup>

At the same time, pressure was resumed, even at this critical moment, on the Czechs. When Mr. Chamberlain and Lord Halifax had received the Czechoslovak reply from Masaryk on the 25th (the latter reported to his Government the following day), the British Prime Minister was "sincerely astonished at the fact that we do not intend to withdraw our troops from the frontier fortifications. I underlined that only yesterday those fortifications were occupied by the troops on the advice of Britain and France themselves, and that we cannot evacuate them again to-day. This Chamberlain cannot understand. It is simply a misfortune that this stupid, ignorant and insignificant man should be British Prime Minister."<sup>85</sup> However, the Czechoslovak Government on the 26th accepted an offer from Chamberlain of participation in an international conference to consider the Anglo-French plan of September 19 and the best way of applying it. On the

<sup>82</sup> Churchill, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

<sup>83</sup> Bonnet, *De Washington au Quai d'Orsay* (1946), p. 273. According to Wheeler-Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 150, the B.B.C. "for technical reasons" did not broadcast the statement in German: but of course it was cabled by the news agencies.

<sup>84</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 565-6. Curiously enough, neither Wheeler-Bennett nor the Chatham House *Survey* mentions this offer of an Anglo-German pact against the U.S.S.R.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Berber, *Dokumente des Deutschen Friedenswillen* (Essen, 1940), a collection issued by the German Government which included Czechoslovak archives.



27th Lord Halifax sent a message to Beneš conveying Hitler's reply to the message sent by Wilson: unless by 2 p.m. on the 28th the Czechs accepted the Nazi terms, German forces would invade "almost immediately". Of course he wouldn't presume to advise them—but they should know that "nothing that any other Power can do will prevent this fate for your own country and people".<sup>86</sup> On the same day he was pressing the French—even if Hitler did attack Czechoslovakia—not to declare war or take other offensive measures, likely to start a world war, "without previous consultation or agreement".<sup>87</sup> As in fact the Anglo-French conference of the 25th and 26th *had* been an occasion for consultation and agreement on that very eventuality, Lord Halifax's message was simply an attempt to use any last possibility remaining of sowing doubts in the mind of the French Government as to whether Great Britain would support them.

On the night of the 26th, Mr. Chamberlain had followed up his private message to Hitler by a public one, in a broadcast pledging that the British Government (since Hitler did not trust the Czechoslovak Government) would undertake to see that the pledges given by President Beneš and his government would be "carried out fairly and fully". All that was needed was that Hitler should agree to "transfer by discussion and not by force". The following evening he showed that he meant this, by sending the Czechoslovak Government a long series of new proposals—for a German token occupation of certain territories on October 1: for an Anglo-German-Czech Committee to sit in the border districts and arrange for withdrawal of Czechoslovak troops and entry of German troops, safeguarding of minorities, etc.: for the entry of British Legion units and (possibly) British troops; for subsequent negotiations to "revise Czechoslovakia's present treaty relationships", etc. The alternative, Czechoslovakia was told, was invasion and dismemberment—and that, even after a war, she "could not be reconstituted in her frontiers, whatever the result of the conflict may be". *This scheme was communicated to the German Government before the Czechoslovak Government had any opportunity to discuss it* (they accepted it only under protest, thirty-six hours later).<sup>88</sup> Thus the Germans had a demonstration that the British Government no longer regarded itself as under any special obligation of friendship or League Covenant commitments to Czechoslovakia. Nor was this all.

Mr. Chamberlain, the same evening, made a broadcast in which he assured the British public that the handing over of the Sudeten districts would not only settle a "quarrel in a far-away country between

<sup>86</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. II, p. 570.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 575-6.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 572-3.

people of whom we know nothing", but would also mean, according to Hitler's promise which he believed, "the end of Germany's territorial claims in Europe". He endorsed, by implication, Hitler's "indignation that grievances have not been met before". All he objected to was Hitler's demand for immediate occupation of the territories, which he thought "unreasonable". To Hitler, Chamberlain repeated the assurances of a British guarantee that promises would be carried out, and an offer "to pay even a third visit to Germany". Thus publicly, no less than through diplomatic channels, the Prime Minister was already speaking of Czechoslovakia *au bout des dents*, as the French say—as though it were something with an unpleasant smell, to be kept at arm's length and treated as such, if only Hitler would observe the minimum proprieties. A.R.P. preparations and the evacuation of school children, and the mobilisation of the Fleet ordered the same evening, drove home the lesson to the British people.

Hitler would not have been the astute adventurer that he was if he had not responded to such an offer. Continuing to rattle the sabre as loudly as he could, he sent Chamberlain, that evening, his subtly-worded "reasonable" letter which has already been described, seeming to reply to the Czechs by arguments instead of abuse, and ending with the invitation to Chamberlain to "continue your efforts . . . at the very last hour".

At this moment there arose precisely the situation which Neville Henderson, the British Ambassador in Berlin, had foreseen on August 2, in a letter to Strang discussing the possibility of a Four-Power Conference being called in the event of a deadlock. Strang (on July 30) had feared that by including Italy it might stiffen Germany's attitude and "might make it difficult to exclude Russia from the Conference".<sup>89</sup> If there were a real crisis, things would be different, said Henderson. "There would be no question then of stiffening the German attitude; Italy would be coming in of her own volition solely to reduce its stiffness and to avoid war. In the middle of a crisis, there might be no time to invite Russia's participation, or Poland's, nor have either of those Powers any responsibility in the creation of Czechoslovakia. Let me quote an example of what I mean. The stages of a deadlock are the following:

- (a) Both parties refuse to abandon their principles.
- (b) The Sudeten break off negotiations.
- (c) Germany starts mobilising on the ground of protection of their

<sup>89</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, p. 614.



Sudeten kinsfolk, who have organised a general strike or are in actual revolt.

(d) France also begins mobilising.

"At (b), or more probably (c) or (d), Italy as the friend of Germany proposes to Great Britain as the friend of France to offer Anglo-Italian mediation.

"That is the Four-Power Conference I mean. It will constitute a last resort, and the question of other participants should not be allowed to arise."<sup>90</sup> And this is almost exactly what was done.

Chamberlain himself had on the 25th proposed a conference in his message to the Czechoslovak Government: on the 27th Roosevelt had suggested one. Now, at 11.30 a.m. on the morning of the 28th, Chamberlain sent a message to Hitler: "After reading your letter I feel certain that you can get all essentials without war and without delay." He was ready to come to Germany at once to discuss arrangements for transferring the Sudeten territory with Hitler and a Czechoslovak representative, and with those of France and Italy, if Hitler desired. He was certain that agreement could be reached in a week. Surely Hitler would not start a world war "which may end civilisation" for the sake of a few days' delay in settling a long-standing problem.<sup>91</sup> He also telegraphed to Mussolini to support his proposal.

Hitler replied by inviting Chamberlain, Daladier and Mussolini to Munich the following morning (he had already settled the details by telephone with Mussolini). The announcement in the House of Commons by Chamberlain, on the afternoon of the 28th—after he had read his own appeals to Hitler and Mussolini—produced a hysterical scene, members cheering, shouting, weeping and throwing their papers in the air. It is said that Anthony Eden walked out, and that one other Government supporter remained seated. Churchill too was silent. What is certain is that, of the five speeches which followed—Clement Attlee, Sir Archibald Sinclair, the Liberal leader, James Maxton (I.L.P.), George Lansbury, the Socialist pacifist, and William Gallacher, the only Communist M.P.—the first four all supported Chamberlain. Only Gallacher (having to shout to make himself heard) said: "No one desires peace more than I and my party, but peace based on freedom and democracy and not on the dismemberment and destruction of a small State. It is the policy of the National Government that has led us into this situation (cries of 'No'). Yes, and if we get peace, it is the determination of the people that has saved it. Whatever the outcome, the National Government will have to account

<sup>90</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 36.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 587.

for its policy. I am no party to what is going on here. There are as many Fascists on the other side of the House as in Germany. I object to the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia."

The proceedings at Munich, and the decisions adopted, have already been described. Chamberlain had hitherto promised all consideration and equality of treatment for Czechoslovakia (subject, of course, to her accepting dismemberment). Now, at the conference itself, the detailed record shows that he accepted Hitler's refusal even to admit its representative to its deliberations—pleading only that it would be convenient to have such a representative in a neighbouring room, to give any assurance that might be necessary. When Hitler objected even to this, the proposal was dropped.<sup>92</sup> A member of the Czechoslovak delegation which did nevertheless fly to Munich has described how they were kept waiting many hours, until Sir Horace Wilson at 10 p.m. gave them even the first outlines of what was proposed, with a map showing the areas to be occupied at once; and took not the slightest interest in what they had to say. Only at 1.30 a.m. was the delegation admitted to the presence of the British and French delegations (the Germans and Italians having already left)—to be handed the agreement and to be told by Chamberlain that "there was no question except of applying a plan which we had already accepted". During enquiries which were made about details of the agreement, "Mr. Chamberlain yawned without ceasing and with no show of embarrassment".<sup>93</sup>

It was in keeping with the spirit of the occasion that, in a conversation at Hitler's flat, later that morning, held at Chamberlain's request, the latter mentioned that he and Mussolini had agreed during the Conference that the four Powers represented should offer their services to France in order to try and arrange a truce in Spain. Hitler agreed to consider the idea—which meant British and French recognition of the rebel Fascist general (with his Italian troops and German armaments and advisers), and ignoring their official diplomatic relations with the Spanish Republic: an obvious preliminary to imposing a Hitler-Mussolini settlement on Spain as well as Czechoslovakia.

The main purpose of the talk, however, was to secure from Hitler a joint statement declaring "the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again", and pledging both sides to use "the method of consultation" on any other questions that might "concern our two countries". A Four-Power agreement which settled the

<sup>92</sup> *D. & M.*, vol. I, pp. 237-40.

<sup>93</sup> Report by Dr. H. Masářík, printed in Ripka, *op. cit.*, pp. 224-7.

fate of Europe without the U.S.S.R., followed by an Anglo-German agreement which, if applied, would determine how the four Powers would act—Hitler and Chamberlain, each for his own reasons, could wish for nothing better.

From that time onwards, as was remarked at the League Assembly on the evening of the 30th by one of the bitter wits always to hand on such occasions, the uppermost thought in the minds of other States was that "you may at any time become someone's Czechoslovakia"—and that in their dealings with Great Britain in particular, they must above all avoid becoming a victim of the British Government's transactions in the name of peace.

But a particularly important aspect of this was the fact that, except for one occasion on September 23, at Geneva (of which more later), the British Government kept the Soviet Union at arm's length during the whole period from March to the end of September. So much was clear to the public, and it was commented on more than once in the House of Commons. But the publication of the diplomatic papers since the war, and particularly those of the British Foreign Office, has underlined that the interest of the British Government and its officials throughout was to avoid contact with the Soviet Government as much as possible, to reject its suggestions where offered, and to spread as much distrust of and hostility to the idea of co-operating with the U.S.S.R. as it could. A brief calendar will suffice:

March 23. Halifax tells French Ambassador that the Soviet Note of March 17 had no "great value".

He tells Maisky that the British Government rejects the Soviet proposals (March 24).

April 19. British Ambassador reports from Moscow that there is no reason "for doubting the possibility of a revolution if this country were to become involved in war". The economic system would not be likely "to stand up to the strain". There would be "a complete breakdown of all supplies and communications". Any defeats "could not fail to produce a collapse which might well overturn the régime".

The military attaché produces even more idiotic "information" (e.g. that "there might be a danger to the régime in mobilisation", and that he doubts "whether there are now available men who are capable of commanding armies in the event of war").

April 29. Lord Halifax duly reports in this sense at the conference with French Ministers, doubting if the U.S.S.R. "could make any contribution at all to the protection of Czechoslovakia".

May 15. British Chargé d'Affaires in Moscow expatiates at length on the same lines as on April 19 (e.g. that the Soviet General Staff and High Command are in "appalling chaos and disorganisation"), with this gem: "The Russians are Asiatics, more so now than at any period since Peter the Great."

May 22. He follows this up by forecasting that "the Soviet Union is unlikely to go to war in defence of Czechoslovakia".

May 27. Halifax suggests that the Chargé d'Affaires should try and get Litvinov to exercise pressure on the Czechoslovak Communists: the Chargé d'Affaires prudently declines, saying it would be rejected.

May 31. British military attaché in Moscow reports that the Soviet Government "will find any pretext to avoid the necessity of having to fulfil its engagements to Czechoslovakia and France".

June 14. British Minister in Warsaw reports that the Chief of the Polish Staff has informed the British military attaché (with a wealth of detail) that "Russia would very soon reach a crisis which would put her out of action not for months but for years".

July 16. Bonnet tells British Ambassador Phipps—and Phipps agrees—that Beneš asking him to sound Russia about help, in the event of war with Germany, showed "what a dangerous frame of mind he is in".

September 2. Phipps reports that Bonnet has been "pestered lately by the Soviet Ambassador, acting on instructions from M. Litvinoff, to show more firmness in Czechoslovakia and to urge greater firmness on the part of His Majesty's Government".

Bonnet asked what help the Soviets would give if the Germans attacked Czechoslovakia, "but so far there is no reply" (in fact it had been given that very day—the first time it was asked).

September 6. Bonnet tells Phipps that Litvinov's reply is that the U.S.S.R. will (i) wait until France begins to fulfil her obligations, (ii) then bring the matter before Geneva. Meanwhile he proposes a joint Anglo-Franco-Soviet declaration "that they will keep the peace, if necessary by force" (an impudent travesty, as will be seen later).



- September 8. Halifax "notes" Litvinov's real proposals, reported on September 3 by Churchill, who thought them "of the first importance" (*op. cit.*, p. 229).
- September 10. British Minister in Warsaw urges that France should make every effort in Moscow "to prevent the Soviet Union taking any measure which might determine Poland to throw herself into the German camp".
- September 11. Bonnet rejects Litvinov's proposal of discussions at Geneva: British Government agrees.
- September 23. Halifax instructs British delegation at Geneva to ask the Soviet delegation about what they would do if Czechoslovakia were at war with Germany (the first such enquiry). Litvinov tells them (elaborating on proposals he had made publicly, in the Assembly, on September 21). Nothing more ever heard. Churchill calls it "indeed astonishing" that "the Soviet offer was in effect ignored" (*op. cit.*, p. 239).
- September 29. Halifax calls in Maisky to tell him that the U.S.S.R. was not invited to Munich because Hitler and Mussolini would refuse to sit down with its representatives.

That is all—a proud record of diplomacy: sixteen occasions in seven months of 1938 (nearly half of them in September) on which the Soviet Union's attitude was discussed by British diplomats, in a form thought suitable for publication by the editors of *Documents on British Foreign Policy*! Most of the sixteen occasions were for the purpose of recording or spreading imbecile and malicious tittle-tattle. On only three of the sixteen occasions was there direct discussion with representatives of the Soviet Government—two of them formally to reject Soviet offers of co-operation, the third (despite promises to keep in touch) amounting to the same thing. Not once was it thought worth while to invite a leading member of the Soviet Government to London, or to send a member of the Inner Cabinet to Moscow—if only to clear up alleged doubts as to where the Soviet Government stood.

This was quite an important aspect of the Chamberlain Government's diplomacy during the months from March to September, 1938; although an assessment of its meaning must be reserved for a later chapter.

## CHAPTER VI

## AN INCONVENIENT PACT

1. *The Pledges of France*

THE Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry official whose report was quoted earlier was particularly moved by the fact that it was a Frenchman who confirmed to him that a sentence of death, from which there was no appeal, had been passed on the independent and democratic republic of Czechoslovakia. He was impressed also by the evident confusion of the French Prime Minister. He wrote: "The French were obviously ashamed, and seemingly realised the consequences which that sentence would have for French prestige. Mr. Chamberlain, after a short introduction, mentioned the agreement which had just been concluded, and then handed to our Minister Mastný the text of the agreement to be read aloud. . . . I asked MM. Daladier and Léger whether they expected our Government to make a statement in reply to the agreement with which they had presented us. M. Daladier, visibly confused, did not reply. M. Léger, on the contrary, replied that the four statesmen had very little time at their disposal. He then added quite definitely that they do not now await any reply on our part, but they naturally consider the plan already adopted, and that our Government must this very day, not later than 5 p.m., send its delegate to Berlin to a session of the International Commission. . . . The atmosphere was becoming positively unbearable for everyone.

"We were told in a sufficiently brutal way, and by a Frenchman at that, that it was a sentence from which there was no appeal, and in which there was no possibility whatsoever of making any alterations."

Mr. Masařík's anger was understandable. The Franco-Czechoslovak Treaty concluded on January 25, 1924, was quite clear. It ran:

"Article 1. The Government of the French Republic and of the Czechoslovak Republic undertake to act in concert on external questions calculated to endanger their security and to disturb the order established by the peace treaties of which they are both signatories.

"Article 2. The high contracting parties will come to an agreement as to the measures proper to the safeguarding of their common interests, should the latter be menaced. . . ."

In the further Treaty signed between the two countries at Locarno on October 16, 1935, Article 1 ran:

"In the event of Czechoslovakia or France suffering from a failure to observe the undertakings arrived at this day between them and Germany with a view to the maintenance of general peace, France, and reciprocally Czechoslovakia, acting in application of Article 16 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, undertake to lend each other immediate aid and assistance, if such a failure is accompanied by an unprovoked recourse to arms.

"In the event of the Council of the League of Nations, when dealing with a question brought before it in accordance with the said undertakings, being unable to succeed in making its reports accepted by all its members other than the representatives of the parties to the dispute, and in the event of Czechoslovakia or France being attacked without provocation, France or reciprocally Czechoslovakia, acting in application of Article 15, paragraph 7 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, will immediately lend aid and assistance."

There could be no doubt as to the threat to the security of Czechoslovakia and to the interests of both countries which existed in the spring and summer of 1938. The French Government's idea of acting in concert with Czechoslovakia turned out to be to demand continually, under threat of being left alone to face invasion, that Czechoslovakia should voluntarily accept the complete destruction of the order established by the Peace Treaties (and incidentally, as regards the mountain frontiers of Bohemia, the order established by a thousand years of history).

There could be no doubt that Germany, in August and September, 1938, was failing to observe her undertakings of 1925 to maintain general peace, and was threatening to have recourse to arms in order to bring this about—which France, as a signatory of the Peace Treaties, could hardly fail to regard as an unprovoked attack. It turned out that the French Government's idea of preparing to render immediate assistance was to conclude an agreement with Germany without consulting Czechoslovakia, to ensure that the German army should march in without meeting any resistance, and then to present Czechoslovakia

with the alternative either of accepting this occupation or of waging a bloody struggle without France lifting a finger.

Yet neither emotion nor confusion at this particular aspect of the Munich decisions were, strictly speaking, justified. The experience of recent years (summarised in chapter II) should have reminded both sides that the breaking of treaty obligations had become a tradition, and co-operation with the aggressor an established custom, with successive governments of the French Republic.

The part played by Pierre Laval, Prime Minister in 1935, in encouraging Italian aggression against Ethiopia and in resisting the application of sanctions against Italy, has already been referred to. It is not without interest that one of the few States which had direct contractual obligations with Ethiopia, *apart* from the League Covenant, was France, which was obliged to keep open the one railway which connected Ethiopia with the sea, and by means of which she could import munitions. The first act of the French Government, when Italian aggression began, was to close the railway.

Unlike Great Britain again, France was bound to Spain by a commercial treaty, under which the closing of the Pyrenees to Spanish trade during peaceful relations between the two countries was an impossibility. This did not prevent the French Government, in July, 1936, closing the French market for Spanish purchases of arms, and the French frontier to their transit—a blockade which had already inflicted grave injury on the Spanish Republic in its desperate struggle against the Italo-German invasion and Fascist rebellion. To-day we know that the blockade proved fatal: but in any case it was still in force, after occasional intermissions, in the autumn of 1938.

In the summer of 1936, also, the Little Entente—Czechoslovakia, Rumania and Yugoslavia—twice proposed to France that she should offer to sign, with Germany and themselves, a mutual assistance pact, directed against aggression by any State whether outside the pact or a signatory to it. What this meant in effect was the reinforcement of the pact which France already had with Czechoslovakia—in a form, moreover, which would oblige Germany to reveal whether she intended to follow up her breach of the Versailles Treaty and of the Locarno Pact, in remilitarising the Rhineland a few months before, by direct aggression. The French Government twice refused—for fear of antagonising the British Government, then anxiously wooing Hitler.<sup>1</sup> This episode, which was known to the Czechoslovak

<sup>1</sup> An account was first printed by Robert Dell, *op. cit.*, pp. 254-5; since the war, it has been confirmed by J. Paul-Boncour, *Entre Deux Guerres*, vol. III (1946), pp. 62-5.



Government though not to the general public, must have caused doubts in its mind as to whether France intended to honour its obligations.

The French railway through Indo-China was one of the very rare channels of trade into China which could not be interrupted by Japanese warships, troops or aeroplanes, without direct aggression against France. The French Government was bound to China, not only by the Covenant of the League of Nations, but—since the League Assembly of September–October, 1937—by a resolution to which France subscribed, and which pledged all members of the League to do nothing which would in any way impede Chinese resistance to the Japanese invader. Neither Covenant nor resolution, however, had prevented the French Government in 1938 from closing, and keeping closed, the railway in question, so far as concerned consignments of munitions for China.

What neither the general public nor, possibly, the Czechoslovak Government knew was the background to 1938 so far as the Franco-Soviet pact of mutual assistance was concerned. It was Czechoslovakia which was the immediate beneficiary of that pact, since Germany was less likely to attack either of its signatories than her southern neighbour, if she had the free choice. The fact that the signature of the pact was followed immediately by one between the U.S.S.R. and Czechoslovakia (May 2, 1935, and May 16, 1935) was a simple recognition of this fact. But after the Franco-Soviet pact was signed, successive French Governments refused to make the necessary preparations to implement it by arranging for staff agreements between the military authorities of the two countries—such as their predecessors, in 1892 and 1912, had concluded with the Tsarist Government of Russia, and as had been agreed when the pact was signed in Paris.

Post-war French memoirs of men who held high office leave no doubts.

General Gamelin records how, on May 4, 1935—two days after the pact had been signed—Alexis Léger, permanent head of the French Foreign Ministry, said to him: "There will be no question for the moment of the methods of Franco-Russian military co-operation." This would be a matter for general staff talks, "when the Governments consider it useful".<sup>2</sup> Clearly the French Government did not consider it useful that summer. Col. Fabry, War Minister from June, 1935, to January, 1936, stated in a book he published under the German occupation that in July, 1935, the Soviet Ambassador came to offer him a military convention (like that of 1892, said Fabry).

<sup>2</sup> Gamelin, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 166.

But without consulting the Supreme National Defence Council, Fabry rejected the offer, because "the Soviet Government seemed to accept, without being frightened, the hypothesis of a European conflict".<sup>3</sup>

In 1936, when Robert Coulondre went to Moscow as French Ambassador, President Kalinin complained to him, on his presenting his credentials, of the obstructive attitude of French officials. "I know only too well how well-founded are his complaints. Our technical departments acted, as it turned out, with much irresponsibility. After having given the representatives of the Soviet army a list of the war material which could be supplied to them, they went back on most of the offers made. The Ministry of Marine, notably, vetoed the delivery of naval guns which had been provided for, and the War Ministry itself reduced the possible deliveries of land guns to those of an old model."<sup>4</sup>

He records how later, in April, 1937, while in Paris, Blum, then Prime Minister, told him of talks between the French General Staff and the Soviet Military attaché. As a result, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs gave him "the draft of a very interesting preliminary military agreement, bearing the date April 15. I was never to hear of it again."<sup>5</sup> Just before this, on April 10, Gamelin had prepared a memorandum, in reply to a Soviet enquiry about French aid, couched in general terms—that France if she were not herself attacked, was "ready to act offensively according to the circumstances of the moment, in the framework of the conditions provided by the pacts of mutual assistance which bind her to various interested countries, and of the obligations upon the League Covenant. All French forces could be used for this offensive action, to the extent that they were not detained on other fronts or in external possessions."<sup>6</sup> This flowery piece of evasiveness explains why Coulondre saw no more of his draft.

Later that year, apparently, Coulondre got the Soviet air authorities to give him plans and specifications of a small fighter plane his air attaché had asked for; the Air Ministry in France said it was interesting but refused to adopt it. Gamelin told him that the chief of the section concerned said: "Never such a humiliation!" Coulondre asked Gamelin: "When an officer replies to you like that, don't you have him arrested?"—but does not record the reply.

When Litvinov was in Paris, in May, 1937, he raised the question

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Reynaud, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 116–18.

<sup>4</sup> Coulondre, *De Staline à Hitler*, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> Gamelin, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

<sup>7</sup> Coulondre, *op. cit.*, pp. 126–7.

of staff talks with Foreign Minister Delbos. The latter told him that the Ministries of Air and Marine were ready, but not the Ministry of War.<sup>8</sup> It never proved ready.

Pierre Cot, who was Minister for Air until January, 1938, states in his memoirs that, after negotiations in 1937, a Franco-Soviet-Czechoslovak air pact, to operate subject to the League Covenant, was ready for signature when he lost his post.<sup>9</sup> It was never concluded. In November, 1937, too, Stalin and Voroshilov spoke to the French trade union leader Jouhaux, during the latter's visit to Moscow, about the failure of the French Government to proceed with a military convention. If the French Government appointed a delegation to negotiate such a convention, it could study for itself the state of the Soviet armed forces. When Jouhaux (as he told Paul Reynaud while they were both in German captivity) reported this to the French Premier, Chautemps, the latter replied: "Have you seen the Russian army yourself?"—and that was all.<sup>10</sup>

These various occasions may or may not have been all known to the Czechoslovak authorities (though their military chiefs were in very close relations with the French General Staff). But the result at any rate was obvious—no military agreement between France and the U.S.S.R., hence nothing practical done to ensure that the treaty of 1935 would operate in case of German aggression. That being so, was it likely that the treaties with Czechoslovakia were intended to operate?

These, then, were the traditions established between 1935 and 1938 by the governments of MM. Laval, Flandin, Blum, Chautemps and Daladier. Therefore professional diplomats should not have been surprised. The peoples were another matter: they had no access to State papers, international negotiations or diplomatic gossip. For the majority of the common people the events of 1938 came with bewildering suddenness.

In the case of France the position to-day, when we come to examine those events more closely, is complicated by the fact that its Foreign Office archives nearly all perished during the war. It is said that they have been partly reconstituted with the help of the files kept in French Embassies abroad; in any case, there have been no such collections of documents published on French foreign policy as those on British or German. It is from the latter archives—to the extent that the British editors (and American, in the case of the captured German

<sup>8</sup> Coulondre, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>9</sup> P. Cot, *Triumph of Treason* (1944), pp. 359-63.

<sup>10</sup> Reynaud, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-30.

documents) have made it possible—that we have to draw our information on French diplomacy in 1938: coupled with press information at the time, and memoirs of varying value mostly (not all) published since 1945.

## 2. Imposing Surrender

What picture emerges? Above all, one of complete co-operation with the British Government in imposing surrender of Czechoslovakia to Hitler—in spite of the programme of isolating and destroying France outlined in *Mein Kampf*.

Even before the seizure of Austria, important voices were raised in France in favour of changing French foreign policy, and denouncing the idea that "France should fight Germany for the sake of Czechoslovakia". Outstanding among these voices was that of Pierre-Etienne Flandin, who had been Prime Minister in 1934-5 and Foreign Minister at the time of Hitler's remilitarisation of the Rhineland. At the meeting of the Senate Commission for National Defence on February 23, 1938, and the Senate Foreign Affairs Commission on February 25—both meetings held in private—the view was advanced (i) that French obligations to Czechoslovakia no longer held, since the Locarno Pact under which the treaty of October, 1925, was concluded had been torn up by the Germans in March, 1936, and never vindicated by the other signatories, Britain and France, and (ii) that France could not give effective help to Czechoslovakia, for geographical reasons, and in any case she could not act without Britain. When Osuský, the Czechoslovak Minister in Paris, told Béranger (chairman of the Foreign Affairs Commission who had attended both meetings) that it was not a question of how France was technically to render aid, but whether she would declare war as in duty bound by her 1924 treaty, before Locarno, if Germany attacked Czechoslovakia, and that Britain could never stand aside if France said that an attack on Czechoslovakia meant war, Béranger was quite surprised. He hadn't thought of these arguments.

This alone showed how far even supporters of collective security had moved towards a purely defensive position in face of the pro-Nazis. The same was demonstrated at another meeting of the Foreign Affairs Commission on March 2, at which Laval directly challenged the idea that France was under any obligation to Czechoslovakia. He was not successful; but the Foreign Minister Yvon Delbos tried to prevent any mention of loyalty to France's obligations appearing in the communiqué of the meeting. All he wanted was a promise



that France "in alliance with England" would pursue a policy of "national security and European peace".<sup>11</sup> Seeing that the two governments' interpretation of that policy had already, for over eighteen months, led them to assist Mussolini and Hitler in strangling the Spanish Republic, Delbos' opposition to declarations of loyalty to France's obligations (of which that to Czechoslovakia was outstanding) was particularly ominous.

These issues also arose, publicly and sharply, in a debate of the Chamber of Deputies on February 25 and 26, 1938—after Hitler by threats had largely secured the nazification of Austria from within, but before his troops marched in. Alexander Werth has recorded a vivid and documented account. It was all there—would not Czechoslovakia be next: was France, under pressure from Chamberlain, changing her foreign policy (this after "non-intervention" in Spain!): would she carry out her treaty obligations: if she had to fight, would she not be fighting for herself, not only for Czechoslovakia: yes, but was she strong enough, must she not be cautious, should she not listen to Chamberlain? Flandin and others preached agreement with Hitler. The Government spokesmen—Premier Chautemps and Delbos—twice pledged loyalty to Czechoslovakia, and got their vote of confidence: but there were about 150 abstentions, a quarter of the deputies—which "included a great many people who were already *Munichois* at heart".<sup>12</sup>

The diplomatic and other documents, however, reveal that these people already had a profound, and very soon a decisive, influence on government policy. A discussion on March 15, on how to help Czechoslovakia, was held by the Standing Committee on National Defence (the leading Ministers and service chiefs attending). It was prompted by an enquiry from Lord Halifax on the 12th; and showed general agreement that the only way for France to help, if Czechoslovakia were attacked, was to mobilise, and to attack Germany herself. But already all sorts of doubts were expressed as to whether the U.S.S.R. could or would do anything to help (obstruction by Poland and Rumania; had the Czechs adequate airfields? and so on). The farthest that anyone went to resolve this difficulty was when Blum said that they must urge the British to "act at Bucharest".<sup>13</sup> No one suggested holding immediate staff talks with the U.S.S.R., to find out at first hand what it could do. And even Litvinov's proposals, two days later,

<sup>11</sup> An account of all these proceedings was given in a dispatch by Osuský (*D. & M.*, vol. I, pp. 68-80).

<sup>12</sup> Werth, *France and Munich* (1939), pp. 45-62.

<sup>13</sup> Gamelin, *op. cit.*, pp. 322-5. See also the account (clearly of the same meeting) in Paul-Boncour, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-9.

of a consultation between interested Powers left the French Government unmoved. It was more impressed by Lord Halifax's memorandum on the 22nd, saying that Britain would not add to her existing obligations—to support France against an *unprovoked* attack by Germany—and that no help to Czechoslovakia could prevent its military occupation; so that the best thing was to bring pressure to bear on Czechoslovakia to satisfy Hitler on the German minority question.

True, there was one short-lived attempt to pursue a different policy. On the 24th Paul-Boncour, Foreign Minister for a few days, told the British Ambassador that a joint warning should go to Germany, and that France would act under the League Covenant if Czechoslovakia were attacked—even though, as he hints in his memoirs, some of Chamberlain's "representatives in Paris" were trying to arrange matters with the politicians so that the French Government itself should "relieve him" of this obligation. Among these was the late Charles Mendl, the British Ambassador's press attaché, says Paul-Boncour.<sup>14</sup> During the first week of April the French representatives in Moscow, Warsaw, Berlin, Budapest and the Little Entente were called to Paris, to discuss the question of military assistance to Czechoslovakia with the Minister for Foreign Affairs. But on April 8, the Government was overthrown: and Alexander Werth—then *Manchester Guardian* correspondent in Paris, and well acquainted with what was going on between the British Embassy and French politicians—writes that "there is good reason for saying that . . . the British Government made it very plain to M. Daladier, the prospective new Premier, that it would consider the reappointment of M. Paul-Boncour to the Quai d'Orsay as eminently undesirable". Paul-Boncour himself claims to have developed this point of view—the necessity of defending Czechoslovakia in France's own interest—in a talk with Daladier on April 10: and that the latter rejected it, and appointed Bonnet as the new Foreign Minister instead, because "we are not in a position to pursue your policy".<sup>15</sup>

Be that as it may, it is a fact that on April 11, Lord Halifax was already increasing the pressure on the new French Government to drive the Czechoslovak Government in the way desired—by underlining that it should not count too much on British support;<sup>16</sup> and this was being supported even beforehand by an unrestrained campaign in the press—first right-wing, then Radical. Werth quotes some

<sup>14</sup> Paul-Boncour, *op. cit.*, pp. 84, 90-1.

<sup>15</sup> Werth, *op. cit.*, p. 131; Paul-Boncour, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-101.

<sup>16</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, pp. 140-3.

of the typical attacks—"Will you fight for the Czechs?": Czechoslovakia was "not a country at all, a heap of nationalities, a country that looks like the Republic of San Marino": "the bones of a little French soldier are worth more to us than all the Czechoslovaks in the world": "We are literally encircled."<sup>17</sup> A leading constitutional lawyer, Barthélemy, published an article in the *Temps* on April 12 repeating the argument that the Locarno Pacts had been torn up, that the alliance with Czechoslovakia no longer existed, and that it was not worth while "setting fire to the world" and three million Frenchmen perishing, "to save the Czechoslovak State". It was natural in these circumstances that, already some days before, the German Ambassador in Paris was reporting with satisfaction the sarcastic comments on the idea of helping Czechoslovakia, and looking forward to her "gradual isolation".<sup>18</sup> He had many more reasons for such satisfaction to come.

Before the visit of the French Minister to London on April 28 and 29, Gamelin, as Chief of the General Staff, presented to Daladier (April 24) a note on how Czechoslovakia could be defended. As in duty bound, he pointed out how much the effectiveness would depend on action by other members of the Little Entente, the U.S.S.R., Poland and the British Empire: nevertheless, general mobilisation and an offensive against Germany were by no means excluded.<sup>19</sup> There was some trace of this memorandum in the first attitude of Daladier at the meeting with the British Ministers (as was shown earlier): but it did not survive for very long, and pressure on Prague, not a clear "hands off!" to Berlin, was the agreed outcome.

After this visit of Daladier and Bonnet to London, the French Minister in Prague joined with his British colleague at the beginning of May in pressing upon the Czechoslovak Government the advice to make concessions which had been decided upon. This pressure continued throughout the next five months. In their indignation at the Czech mobilisation of May 20-21; in their demand thereafter (on May 27-28) that the reservists should be sent home; in their complaint after Captain Wiedemann's visit to London and Lord Halifax's visit to Paris, in July, that the Czechoslovak Government was not making concessions "resolutely enough"; in their hearty agreement, in mid-July, to sending Lord Runciman to Prague; in their pressure on the Czechoslovak Government in August to make further concessions, when the Nazis had rejected out of hand the further offers of

<sup>17</sup> Werth, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-19, 121-2.

<sup>18</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, pp. 217-23.

<sup>19</sup> Gamelin, *op. cit.*, p. 318.

the Czechoslovak Government; in the virtual ultimatum to Beneš on September 3, which forced the final "Fourth Plan" out of the Prague Government—at all stages the French Cabinet acted in perfect unison with the British, and its Minister in Prague with the British Minister. True, as a precautionary measure, once the Czechoslovak Government had accepted the principles of the "Fourth Plan", 300,000 men of the French reserve were called up. Garrisons along the eastern frontier had their leave stopped (September 4) and the Maginot Line was manned by all its technical troops (September 5). But this was solely because German forces were concentrating on the French border as well as that of Czechoslovakia, as the French military authorities impressed on the Germans on September 2 and 3.

The keynote of the attitude of the French Government throughout this period, so to speak, had been struck by the remark of Bonnet to the German Ambassador in Paris on April 30, just after returning from London, in urging him to impress on his Government not to act violently: "Any arrangement was better than a world war, in the event of which all Europe would perish, and both victor and vanquished would fall victims to world Communism": and the assurance (mentioned earlier) which was given by de Brinon, a friend of Daladier, to a German Embassy agent that the French Government had decided to "put to sleep" the Franco-Soviet Pact.<sup>20</sup>

At the time of Czechoslovak mobilisation on May 20—the very same day, in fact—Coulondre, the French Ambassador in Moscow, on leave in Paris, agreed with Bonnet that there should now be staff conversations in Moscow between France, the U.S.S.R. and Czechoslovakia: Bonnet told him that at Geneva this had been Litvinov's suggestion. After discussing the matter with Gamelin, Coulondre drew up a paper setting forth the procedure to be followed, which was approved by high officials of the Foreign Ministry. When he saw Bonnet with it on the 23rd, however, he found the Minister "hesitant" and was told to show it to Daladier. The latter after some discussion agreed, but told him that "he had bad information on the Soviet army". Bonnet, the same evening, was still hesitant, but finally confirmed his agreement. The Ambassador left for Moscow a few days later, feeling that at last he had got a little further forward. But the next few weeks undeceived him.

He was surprised to hear his Polish colleague in Moscow, Grzybowski, on the 27th, expressing his conviction that France would avoid resorting to arms "in the pursuit of a chimera"—trying to save

<sup>20</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, pp. 254, 258.



Czechoslovakia. Coulondre noticed that Potemkin, Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, did not comment when he referred to the coming staff talks: "Had he had bad news from Paris?" As for Litvinov, the Ambassador found him wondering what France would do if the U.S.S.R. went to the help of a Czechoslovakia attacked by Poland as well as Germany! Coulondre began anxiously pressing Paris for those urgent staff talks again—and "I was not long in discovering that, once more, I had been rolling one of the rocks of Sisypheus". Fear had swept away, like so many others, "the sheet of paper I had brought back from Paris".<sup>21</sup>

Coulondre evidently was unaware that, on the afternoon of May 22, not only had Lord Halifax again given one of his periodic warnings that France should not rely on British help if the Czechoslovak mobilisation led to war,<sup>22</sup> but Daladier at a private house had spoken to the German Ambassador Welczeck (according to the latter's reports to Berlin) in the most violent terms against the Soviet Union, and declared that war must be prevented, "even if it entailed great sacrifices".<sup>23</sup> The German, of course, heartily agreed. Nor did Coulondre, evidently, know that on the 24th Bonnet and the British Ambassador were telling each other what a "reasonable attitude" the German Government was taking up:<sup>24</sup> and that on the 25th Bonnet had had the conversation, mentioned previously, with the German Ambassador—in which the latter had the pleasure of learning from the French Foreign Minister that his colleagues would threaten the Czechoslovak Government with "review of their obligations" if it continued "unyielding".<sup>25</sup> Perhaps it was only a coincidence: but on the very day of Coulondre's talk with Grzybowski, the Polish Ambassador in Paris reported a conversation with Bonnet in which the latter informed him that the Franco-Soviet Pact was very "vague", and the French Government was not at all inclined to rely upon it. He himself (Bonnet) was not personally an adherent of co-operation with Communism. He would be very glad to tell the Russians that their help was not wanted. However, if there were war with Germany it might come in useful, in order to get war material, etc., from Moscow.<sup>26</sup>

Had Coulondre known, in short, that the French Government was serious in its desire to co-operate with Germany against Czechoslovakia

<sup>21</sup> Coulondre, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-3, 145-6, 150-153.

<sup>22</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, p. 346.

<sup>23</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, p. 327.

<sup>24</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, pp. 366-7.

<sup>25</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, p. 344. It was therefore quite unnecessary for Lord Halifax, on May 31, to press Bonnet to do that very thing (D.B.F.P., vol. I, p. 419).

<sup>26</sup> D. & M., vol. I, p. 113.

—provided only that Hitler did not create difficulties prematurely for it, in face of its people, by kicking over the traces and invading Czechoslovakia too soon—he would not have been so "surprised" and "saddened", as he put it himself, when the Czechoslovak Minister in Moscow on July 1 gave him a report from his Paris colleague to read. It ran: "The French Government is not proceeding at the moment with the plans for Franco-Soviet military conversations, in order not to arouse the susceptibilities of the British Conservatives."<sup>27</sup> It could not have been put better—but we have seen enough of the inner thoughts of both Bonnet and Daladier to be sure that behind this was the feeling that the U.S.S.R. was a bigger enemy than Hitler and must be kept at arm's length. How could they possibly, therefore, sit down with it and discuss practical means of mutual assistance? Time enough for that when they found themselves in a desperate situation, and there was no other way out!

And so the French Government continued to keep in step with the British—though, in view of its treaty with Czechoslovakia and the political alertness of its Opposition, it had to perform greater contortions from time to time than did its British counterpart. Thus, on July 12, Daladier in a public speech declared that the undertakings to Czechoslovakia "are sacred and cannot be evaded". But in private Bonnet at that very time was doing his best to make the Czechoslovak Government feel completely isolated, by telling it that the Rumanians had said in Berlin that they would never allow the passage of Soviet troops to help them. As the Rumanians were allies in the Little Entente, the Czechoslovak Government cabled its surprise to Bucharest—and got back a flat denial!<sup>28</sup> Rumania was in an extremely delicate position, in face of the Germans, and both the British and French Governments repeatedly took advantage in this way of the Rumanian Government's unwillingness to commit itself beforehand. Yet if they themselves had not been playing fast and loose with their obligations, they could have cleared up its position by raising the question of aid to Czechoslovakia, if attacked, at the League of Nations. Then, under Article 16, paragraph 3, of the League Covenant, Rumania would have been not only entitled, but bound, to grant passage to Soviet troops on their way to aid a victim of aggression.

With the adoption by the Czechoslovak Government of the "Fourth Plan", however, it was as clear in France as in Great Britain that the decisive stage had been reached. Just as that stage, on September 7, produced *The Times* leading article once again—but at the most

<sup>27</sup> Coulondre, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

<sup>28</sup> D. & M., vol. I, pp. 139-40.

critical moment—advocating annexation of Czechoslovakia's fortified borders to Germany, so on September 6, it produced an editorial by Emile Roche, president of the Radicals in the industrial north of France, and a close friend of Bonnet, advocating the same thing. "Can Prague still persist in counting 3,200,000 Germans among its loyal subjects? If so, all will be well. But if not, the two races which cannot agree to live together within a framework of the centralised Czech State must be separated. Neither of them would die as a result, nor would Central Europe."<sup>29</sup>

More and more openly, this now became the slogan of the French Government, after having been that of the bulk of the right-wing press for months past. As late as September 8, Daladier was telling the British Ambassador of the weakness of the German fortifications, Soviet concentrations on the Rumanian frontier, and so forth: and the following day the French Ambassador in London made his representations in favour of a joint warning to Hitler which produced the lecture, already quoted from Lord Halifax, about accepting aggression to-day because it might not happen to-morrow. But after Hitler's Nuremberg speech on the 12th this show of resistance was dropped, and Daladier (Ambassador Phipps reported to London) was "quite a different one to (!) the Daladier of September 8", while Bonnet was now demanding peace "at any price".<sup>30</sup>

At a Cabinet meeting that day, Bonnet had told the Ministers that the Russians and Rumanians in Geneva the day before had "wrapped themselves up in League procedure" and had shown "little eagerness to help", and that according to the Soviet Ambassador in Paris, the U.S.S.R. was only thinking of putting up the question for discussion at the League.<sup>31</sup> Whether this bore any resemblance to the truth, will be seen later. It is significant that Gamelin in a discussion with Daladier had once again emphasised that, even if Czechoslovakia were temporarily defeated, it was the outcome of the war which counted: the practical question was that of a direct attack on the German fortifications in the event of war. Germany could dispose 50 divisions there while attacking Czechoslovakia, but taking the overall strength of the two sides, he was sure that "the democratic nations would dictate the peace".<sup>32</sup> (It was some time after this conversation that Gamelin sent a message through the Soviet military attaché which brought the assurance from Voroshilov, mentioned earlier.)

<sup>29</sup> *La République*, quoted in Werth, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

<sup>30</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 269, 270, 310, 312.

<sup>31</sup> Werth, *op. cit.*, p. 248; Gamelin, *op. cit.*, p. 348. Bonnet told much the same story to Phipps: *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 323.

<sup>32</sup> Gamelin, *op. cit.*, pp. 344-5.

However, by this time these military arguments counted for very little. The Cabinet meeting in Paris on the 13th after discussing Hitler's speech took no decisive action (it is said that a minority of the Ministers—Reynaud, Mandel, and some others—wanted a partial mobilisation but were overruled).<sup>33</sup> That evening Daladier sent a message to Chamberlain by the British Embassy, suggesting that Hitler be offered a three-Power conference to discuss the situation.<sup>34</sup> But instead, Chamberlain offered to go himself, and the series of visits to Hitler began which ended at Munich.

Now that the time had seemingly come to throw off the mask, it was the *Temps* which, on the afternoon of September 14—before Mr. Chamberlain had gone to Berchtesgaden—published an editorial which was all the more significant because, as was well known, the *Temps* front-page editorials were the subject of a standing special arrangement with the permanent officials of the French Foreign Office.

The Czechoslovak leaders learnt from it that, after all their sacrifices, most of them directly suggested by their foreign friends, and the last series fully approved beforehand by Lord Runciman, they had "not acted fast enough". The world was informed of a crying falsehood—that three million Sudeten Germans were "practically in a state of rebellion". There was now a danger of German intervention—the very contingency provided for by the treaty of 1925. But the most influential conservative and semi-official organ in France drew the conclusion that the Czechoslovaks must not take "untimely coercive measures"; while Germany was assured that, if she for her part did not do so, and did "not risk her very existence on a throw of the dice", she had obtained, or was on the point of obtaining, "all that was essential".

It will be seen that, in this leading article, the *Temps* not only brought the French semi-official attitude into line with that explained, equally semi-officially, by Mr. Neville Chamberlain on Sunday night, September 11—that Germany could get all she wanted without war—but actually hastened to anticipate the results of Berchtesgaden.

### 3. Bonnet at Work

Then came the second Anglo-French conference of Ministers. When Daladier and Bonnet left for London after Berchtesgaden, on September 18, there were already fears in Paris, according to the correspondent of the *Daily Herald* (September 19) that, in his anxiety to

<sup>33</sup> Werth, *op. cit.*, pp. 251-4.

<sup>34</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 313-14.



shake off treaty obligations to Czechoslovakia, the French Foreign Minister might conceal in London the opinion of the French General Staff. This was that, although the air forces of France were far from what might be desired, they were capable, with the army and fleet and the possibilities of wartime construction, of "meeting any eventuality successfully". These fears proved fully justified: the question of resistance to Hitler's demands now played no part at all in the discussion. Daladier agreed that it was now primarily a question of "friendly pressure" on Czechoslovakia to get her to cede the territory which Hitler demanded: how to "prevent France being forced into war as a result of her obligations, at the same time to preserve Czechoslovakia and save as much of that country as was humanly possible".<sup>35</sup> How this problem was solved, we already know.

Again, it is certain that Bonnet gave a pledge at the French Cabinet on returning from London (September 19) that no pressure would be exerted on the Czechoslovak government to accept the new Anglo-French proposals. This also turned out to be a delusion, as we know. Bonnet warned the Czechoslovak Government, on September 20, that for them to invoke their arbitration treaty with Germany would be "folly": he accepted Phipps' suggestion the same day that, if they did not accept the terms, they should be warned that France and Great Britain "might wash their hands" of it all:<sup>36</sup> and he sent instructions, that night, to Lacroix, the French Minister in Prague, to join with Newton in using precisely that threat to Beneš.<sup>37</sup>

During these fatal twenty-four hours there occurred a particularly disreputable incident. When the minority Ministers in the French Cabinet were protesting, at a meeting on the 21st, at the pressure which had been put on Czechoslovakia contrary to an express promise which had been given them, they were confronted by Bonnet with a telegram from Lacroix, sent on the evening of the 20th after a talk with the Czechoslovak Prime Minister Hodža. The latter had allegedly asked Lacroix to get his Government to send an ultimatum to Czechoslovakia threatening to abandon her to German conquest in the event of war, should she not accept the Anglo-French terms. This was needed, Hodža was supposed to have said (not only for himself but for Beneš) if the Czechoslovak leaders were to get the terms accepted. And this was why, Bonnet explained, the ultimatum *had* been sent, and was presented to Beneš at 1.30 a.m. on the 21st.

<sup>35</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. II, p. 387.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 420, 422.

<sup>37</sup> The phrase which Lacroix used was that, if war broke out as a consequence of Prague's refusal it would be the fault of the Czechoslovak Government, and France "will take no part in it" (Ripka, *op. cit.*, p. 80).

This story silenced the critics. Yet it was only a characteristic and cunning fraud—more dramatic in its immediate consequences, yet no different in substance from the way in which, two months earlier, Mr. Chamberlain had boldly asserted that the sending of Lord Runciman was at the request of the Czechoslovak Government itself, and not due to any pressure from London.

What had happened on the 20th was that the British and French Ministers in Prague, on receiving the Czechoslovak Government's rejection of the terms, had already begun threatening it with abandonment: this is clear from Newton's own cable.<sup>38</sup> Hodža, however, demanded from Lacroix—who was in a different position from Newton, because France was bound by her treaties of 1924 and 1925—formal confirmation in writing that France intended to dishonour her obligations.<sup>39</sup> This was so obvious a demand that Beneš himself repeated it after the visit paid him by the two Ministers during the night.<sup>40</sup> In fact, the message sent on the 21st by Bonnet (publicised already in 1939) corresponded very closely with the ultimatum read out by Lacroix to Beneš earlier that day.<sup>41</sup>

It was Hodža's request for a formal statement which Lacroix chose to interpret as a plea for an ultimatum. This was not a chance thought on his part: as we have seen. Newton was already asking on the afternoon of the 20th for the right to deliver "a kind of ultimatum", which would enable Beneš "to bow to *force majeure*". He did not attempt, however, to father this brilliant idea on either Beneš or Hodža. That was an entirely original contribution of French diplomacy.

On the 22nd, Chamberlain left for Godesberg. The French Parliament was on holiday; only the Central Committee of the Communist Party, its paper *Humanité* and two or three other papers denounced the terms forced on Czechoslovakia. Probably to avoid public discussion of the new line French policy was taking, all public meetings on foreign affairs had been prohibited early in September. This ban would not have been effective, however, had a political crisis been precipitated by the resignation of the three members of the French Cabinet—Mandel, Reynaud and Champetier de Ribes—who offered it on the 22nd, when they saw how Bonnet had kept his promises. But they were nonplussed by the Lacroix telegram, persuaded by Daladier to suspend the resignations during the subsequent Hitler-Chamberlain talks at Godesberg, then hesitated, and finally . . . did

<sup>38</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. II, pp. 426-7.

<sup>39</sup> Ripka, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>40</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. II, p. 440; and Werth, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>41</sup> Seton-Watson, *Munich and the Dictators* (1939), p. 67, and Ripka, *op. cit.*, p. 80.



nothing at all. The solitary protest of a French official—that of the head of the French Military Mission in Prague, General Faucher—who resigned his post and his commission to offer his services to the Czechoslovak army on September 23, was not sufficient to affect internal French politics, even had it been given wide publicity in the French press: which it certainly did not receive.

However, disquiet grew as the news of the armed attacks on the Czechoslovak frontier came through. However great the willingness to placate Hitler, it might after all not succeed. On the evening of September 22 six French divisions were moved up to the German frontier.<sup>42</sup> The following evening, Czechoslovakia mobilised: and the British delegation at Geneva made its “gesture” of an approach to Litvinov (under the eyes of the journalists and diplomats of many countries). Earlier had come the news of the Soviet warning to Poland not to proceed with what looked like an imminent invasion of Czechoslovakia. Later still on the night of the 23rd, after news of how Chamberlain’s talks had gone at Godesberg, the French Government called up two categories of reservists, about 600,000 men, and sent another fourteen divisions to the frontier to which a total of 800,000 men had now been directed.<sup>43</sup> Werth has recorded (with many incidents here omitted) that “there were no protests and no attacks on the Government. . . . One felt an undercurrent of anger against Germany. . . . Obviously nobody was enjoying it; but there was no terrible gloom and depression at the Gare de l’Est. . . . (There) that day nearly everybody spoke of *les Boches*. . . . One was impressed by the deep unity of the French people in a moment of danger. The people were certainly showing an infinitely better spirit than either the newspapers or the politicians.” He mentions how the Paris building workers and the miners of the Northern coalfields called off their strikes.<sup>44</sup>

The newspapers and the politicians were not entirely repressed during these days. Werth quotes the example of *Paris-Midi*, which on the 23rd printed a dispatch from its correspondent at Godesberg forecasting a conference, to which at least France and Italy would be invited, for which technical preparations were being made during the Hitler-Chamberlain talks. There is no record of such preparations; but Bonnet and Daladier had had similar ideas on September 13. Again, at this time, Daladier carried out a political sleight-of-hand trick which would have been amusing in other circumstances. He told an anxious meeting of his own Radical-Socialist Parliamentary Party that France would fight if Czechoslovakia were attacked on

<sup>42</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 461.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 509.

<sup>44</sup> Werth, *op. cit.*, pp. 275-8.

account of refusal to accept the Godesberg terms—but he flew into a rage when someone asked him if he meant Czechoslovakia in her old frontiers, or in those created by the amputation of the frontier districts. “He did not conduct his policy on the market-place”, declared Daladier indignantly, thereby avoiding a plain reply to this crucial question.<sup>45</sup> The results of the Munich conference showed why.

At the third Anglo-French meeting of Ministers, on September 25 and 26, as we have seen, Chamberlain’s basic strategy had been to strike at Daladier’s nerves with searching questions about the alleged weakness of France in defence, as compared with Germany. At first Daladier held out, saying that if Hitler insisted on immediate annexation and there was war, the French army would attempt to invade Germany. It was at this stage of the discussion, answering the British Ministers’ doubts about the weakness of the French air force, that Daladier made a statement about the Soviet air strength on the basis of information which, most probably, had been supplied to him by the French general staff. It is worth recording: “Russia had 5000 planes. At least 800 had been sent to Spain, and whenever they had arrived they had always put the Italian and German planes out of action. The front of the Spanish war had recently been stabilised largely owing to the arrival of 300 Russian planes which had prevented German and Italian air action. 200 Russian planes had been sent to Czechoslovakia from Russia, flown by Czech pilots and ordered by the Czechoslovak Government. French observers had seen these planes and thought them good.”<sup>46</sup>

It is reported, too, that Gamelin—called in during the conference on the 26th—gave an encouraging assessment of the military prospects if there were war (the main points of his statement have been mentioned earlier); and, when Bonnet recalled the report of the chief of the air staff, General Vuillemin, on the weakness of the French air force, Gamelin retorted that “the whole should not be confused with the part”.<sup>47</sup> But Gamelin himself noticed that his reports on the readiness of the Soviet Union to take support action were coldly met. From his talk with the British service chiefs that morning, “it is evident that the hypothesis of seeing Russia invade Poland hardly attracts our Allies” (it was by now clear—since the 23rd—that a German attack on Czechoslovakia would be accompanied by one from Poland).<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> *L’Œuvre*, September 24, 1938.

<sup>46</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 533.

<sup>47</sup> Pertinax, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> Gamelin, *op. cit.*, p. 352. Lord Halifax on the 26th set on foot joint representations of the Polish Government to stave off such an attack (*D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 545).



And, as we know, the main decision of the conference, while preparing for possible war, was to continue with pressure on Prague for fulfilment of the Anglo-French proposals of the 19th.

It speaks eloquently to the real spirit in which the French Government was preparing that no sooner had Bonnet returned to Paris than he, in his turn, began bombarding the British Government with "searching" questions about whether it would introduce conscription immediately, mobilise at the same time as France, pool its economic resources, etc. The purpose of these questions was obvious: to supply him with ammunition for internal use, in order, if possible, to break down enthusiasm for resistance to Hitler. It was for the same reason, no doubt, and not without collusion, that the same afternoon the *Temps* came out with these very demands to Great Britain, in the shape of a letter from Flandin.<sup>49</sup> And still for the same reason, when the famous Foreign Office communiqué about Britain and Russia standing by France reached Paris, in the evening, Bonnet told journalists that it was of "no importance" and "lacked confirmation": while the newspapers which he was able to influence (and there were many) denounced it as a forgery.<sup>50</sup>

That morning, also, the monarchist Charles Maurras, in *l'Action Française*, had denounced those who preached standing up to Hitler (unless he directly attacked France) as serving "but one cause, that of a new Commune under the colours of Moscow".<sup>51</sup> And the same day, Lord Halifax having enquired of the British Ambassador whom he had had in mind when referring to the "small but noisy and corrupt war group", Sir Eric Phipps replied: "I meant the Communists who are paid by Moscow and have been working for war for months."<sup>52</sup> Evidently the contacts between "Mr. Chamberlain's friends" in Paris and certain quarters in French politics, of which Paul-Boncour as we have seen had complained in March, were still strong.

However, French mobilisation continued, and the partial evacuation of Paris began—most of the children (French people in the big towns still had relatives in the country), about 600,000 people in all by the 28th, a little over a fifth of the population of two and three-quarter million. This was not a "fear-crazed exodus" in which "a

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 558-9. The *Temps* always bore the date of the day after it had appeared: the writer well remembers the sarcastic comments at Geneva, on the morning of the 27th, at Flandin's sudden attack of "bellicosity", the purpose of which was only too obvious.

<sup>50</sup> Werth summarises the material on this, *op. cit.*, pp. 288-91.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted by Ripka, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

<sup>52</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 544.

third of the population fled the city"—to quote the insulting passage in Mr. Wheeler-Bennett's account, which loftily ignores the fact that, unlike the Londoner, the Parisian knew that his country had been invaded twice, in less than seventy years. By the 28th nearly one and a half million men were with the colours in France, and as many (thirty-five divisions, over one and a half millions) in Czechoslovakia. The British Fleet was also mobilised. The British military attaché in Paris was told by Gamelin's "most confidential staff officer" that in their opinion Germany "would not succeed in overcoming the country (Czechoslovakia) without hard fighting and great losses, nor did he think that it would be done very quickly".<sup>53</sup> All objective French reports on the strength of Czechoslovakia—a highly industrialised country, able to maintain a mechanised and motorised army—had for months said the same.

However, this did not deter—on the contrary, it seemed to stimulate—the determination of the French Government to force on Czechoslovakia the capitulation it had planned. While Chamberlain had been considering his final message to Hitler, Bonnet on the early morning of the 28th proposed to the British Government the convening of a Four-Power conference, including Italy. The British Government had taken steps in Rome to procure the same result, and later that morning Chamberlain sent his appeal to Berlin. In the afternoon, Daladier received his invitation to Munich. In the evening, Bonnet told the British Ambassador that an agreement over the "Sudeten question" was essential, "almost at any price"—and the next morning (as they were seeing Daladier off at the airport) that, as the Treaty of Versailles had collapsed, "many existing frontiers" would have to be changed in Europe.<sup>54</sup>

Of the three changes mentioned by Lord Halifax in his talk with Hitler on November 19, 1937, two—Austria and Czechoslovakia—had now taken place. The third—Danzig—was still to come: and like Czechoslovakia, it involved a treaty signed by France. The conclusion that Poland must come after Czechoslovakia, as surely as the latter came after Austria, occurred to many. This makes all the more interesting one of the most remarkable features of the situation in France which was now to make itself felt. It has already been mentioned that no French Ministers resigned in protest against the destruction of Czechoslovakia's security and independence; whereas in Great Britain one Cabinet Minister, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Mr. Duff Cooper, had had the political courage to do so. A more

<sup>53</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 609-10.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 613.

striking contrast was that, whereas the Munich settlement led in Great Britain to a four days' Parliamentary debate, and to votes in which nearly one-third of the Members of Parliament declared (after the event, it is true) their disapproval of the Government's foreign policy, in France there was barely any debate at all. The Communist Péri and the Nationalist de Kérillis alone attacked the Government in the solitary session of Parliament held after Munich, on October 4 and 5: all parties, with the exception of the Communists, together with one Socialist and one Nationalist, decided on the Government's request to adjourn the debate (the voting was 543 to 75).

Why was this?

On October 2, Jean Mistler, the Radical-Socialist Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber and a close friend of Bonnet's, said in an interview with *Paris-Soir*: "We must carefully re-examine the nature and extent of all our obligations. We must estimate the credit and debit, and distinguish between those which contain mutual and effective guarantees, and those which represent only risks." One thing stood out from this series of veiled allusions—that the pact with Czechoslovakia had certainly not been proved to contain "effective guarantees", and must therefore be classed on the debit side. Were there others? Yes—and they were specified.

Immediately afterwards, the *Temps* printed an editorial likewise dealing with the need for changing French policy. France had in the past been misled, said the article, by the League of Nations and by her pacts concluded with the Powers of Eastern and Central Europe. These pacts "present the inconvenience of being sometimes contradictory" (like the pacts which France concluded with Czechoslovakia and Poland—whose Government joined in the grab for Czechoslovak territory) "and also of automatically associating the risks of France with those of countries more exposed than she is. The recent crisis made the seriousness of this inconvenience strikingly clear. What the French have for a long time considered a protection has been revealed as a peril."

No more remarkable statement of the old idea attributed to French diplomacy—that collective security means, in its eyes, security for France alone—could have been drawn up.

France, it seemed, had long ago considered the Czechoslovak Pact as a protection for itself—a means of automatically associating Czechoslovakia with any risks and perils that France might incur—but not at all as a means of protecting Czechoslovakia. Any such pacts, in the eyes of people who thought like the *Temps* (and the *Temps* in its

foreign affairs leaders spoke for the Quai d'Orsay), must naturally be regarded as a "serious inconvenience".

But of course Hitler, too, considered them an "inconvenience", as appeared before many months were over. The dismemberment of Czechoslovakia opened the way to the "Polish problem"—in which a French treaty also stood in the way.



## "WE MUST NOT QUARREL WITH ENGLAND AND FRANCE"

### 1. *The Internal Struggle*

ONE day, shortly after the sponsoring by the British and French Governments of the Berchtesgaden terms, there was a remarkable scene in the best-known club in Prague. Men of all sorts and conditions, from high officers in the army to village schoolmasters, all from forty to sixty years of age, were assembled in the largest hall of the club. All had the carriage of old soldiers, all bore pinned to their breast one or more French or British decorations, dating back to the first world war. They ranged themselves in lines across the hall. Several large waste-paper baskets were brought in and placed on the dais. One by one each stepped forward and tore the orders and medals from his coat, throwing them into the basket. As the baskets were filled, they were taken out and the contents thrown into the refuse bins.

This symbolic act of the old Czechoslovak Legionaries, gathered specially for the purpose from all parts of the country, spoke a little of the humiliation and impotent rage universally felt in Czechoslovakia, by all among its citizens who valued its independence and its past. For, as was shown earlier, Czechoslovakia was no chance or artificial creation. The revolt of its people, at the end of 1918, had moreover been carefully encouraged by Great Britain and France:

"In February, 1918, when we were engaged in a life-and-death struggle with Germany, the Government . . . had to decide between two policies. One was to try and make a separate peace with Austria-Hungary; the other, as it was described to the Cabinet by Lord Northcliffe, was to try to break the power of Austria-Hungary, as the weakest link in the chain of enemy States, by supporting all anti-German and pro-Ally peoples and tendencies. The second policy was adopted. In consequence, a congress of the subject races of Austria-Hungary was held in Rome, and the propaganda employed in the Austrian Army contributed to the failure of the Austrian offensive. President Wilson announced his lively sympathy with the national

aspirations of the Czechoslovaks and Jugo-Slavs on May 28, and the Entente Powers endorsed this a week later. At the end of June the French Government, and at the beginning of August the British, recognised the Czech National Council as the trustees of the future Czechoslovak Government, and its army as a regular belligerent.

"Thus, in order to defeat Germany, we decided to break up Austria-Hungary and set up these national States. President Wilson threw himself warmly into the project in the name of self-determination. If the Archbishop of Canterbury now says we have no obligations to Czechoslovakia, it must be that he does not recognise the principles of the League of Nations, and also that he is entirely ignorant of the responsible part we took in those momentous transactions. But when Lord Mottistone, a member of the Government that took that part, disclaims responsibility, he leaves us to suppose that a man does not forfeit the title of gentleman if he uses a weak State for his own convenience one day, and throws it over for his own convenience on another. Would it not be better for him to admit that in 1919 he gave Czechoslovakia the fatal gift of her recent frontiers because Germany was weak, and it suited the Allies, and that now he approves of their violent alteration, with all the consequences of violence, because Germany is powerful?"

The leading article in the *Manchester Guardian* (October 5, 1938) which gave this compact account, and asked the last pertinent question, also asked: "Do we make that treatment look better by calling it justice?" There were not many in Great Britain and France who ventured to call it justice, however else they apologised for it. In Czechoslovakia there were none at all, apart from the Nazis and their supporters. Whether they profited or lost by the situation created in Czechoslovakia, all parties were agreed that President Beneš and the entire people were paying dearly for the confidence which its rulers had placed in Britain and France.

For years, it is true, certain elements—the Agrarian Party in particular—had been pressing for an agreement with Hitler. The Agrarians were the organisation of the rich peasantry and businessmen who had rallied the rest of the peasants under their leadership, when small proprietors took the place of German and Hungarian landowners after the war. But as the capitalist development of Czechoslovakia advanced, within the framework of an independent State, internal markets and export possibilities increased, co-operative selling agencies and an Agrarian Bank facilitated the concentration of capital, and the Agrarians came to represent more and more the interests of a class

of exporting merchants, manufacturers, financiers, large brokers of agricultural produce and substantial farmers who employed hired labour. Less and less their political programme corresponded even in general outline to that of the bourgeois democratic parties—the middle-class Radicals known in Czechoslovakia as “National Socialists” (followers of Beneš), the German and Czech Social-Democrats, etc.—not to speak of the Communists, of course. More and more they were interested in the transformation of Czechoslovakia into a State governed exclusively in the interests of big business—which involved the suppression of democracy inside the country, and reliance upon the nearest anti-democratic forces outside.

They had been given a good start because, after the counter-revolutionary use to which the Western Allies put the Czechoslovak Legions in Russia in 1918–19, many officers and senior N.C.O.s returned with violently anti-Socialist and anti-democratic views. Moreover, Czechoslovakia became a haven of refuge for Russian White officers and politicians; and although political differentiation rapidly developed, once the Legions were home, early struggles with organised labour, and particularly with the Communists, kept the Agrarians and the ruling Beneš party in close alliance. While France was governed in the main by the Right parties, the question of a new foreign orientation did not arise. But when the growth of Hitler's power was followed by the entry into office of the Left parties in France in 1936, the Agrarians began openly pressing for an agreement with Hitler.

This they did irrespective of the question of the German-speaking minority. Then that question became acute as the result of Hitler's threats; and the Agrarians began pressing for agreement with Germany even at the expense of the historic frontiers, i.e. of Czechoslovak independence. The reason was not far to seek: Germany was a boundless and favourable market for agricultural produce, and the Nazi power a reliable ally in the fight against democracy.

In February, 1938, the German diplomatic documents show Eisenlohr, the German Minister in Prague, busily intriguing with Hodža himself and with Rudolf Beran, Secretary-General of the Agrarian Party, to deepen disunity on this question between themselves and the other Czech parties: and to promote if possible the detachment of Czechoslovakia from France and the U.S.S.R.<sup>1</sup> On March 27 we find Beran promising Eisenlohr his help in “liquidating” the German Social-Democrats and Marxism in Czechoslovakia, and in securing entry of the Henleinites into the government.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 137–41, 141–6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

Every attempt to restrain the freedom of action of the Henlein party, whether in the Government or by the people of the Sudeten districts themselves, was resisted by the Agrarian Černý, who held the post of Minister of the Interior, and by the Agrarian Prime Minister Hodža. On May 18, according to a report of the *Havas Agency*, Beran in a speech at an election meeting, outlined the following programme for which his party stood: (i) “no compromise with the Communist Party” (which apparently meant that there should be no Popular Front in face of the German menace), (ii) a “courageous understanding” with the Henlein party (privately Beran was in fact advocating the latter's entry into the Government coalition, even at the price of shedding the Social-Democratic and Catholic Parties), (iii) an understanding on foreign policy with Germany, Poland and Hungary, (iv) closer relations with Italy, (v) appointment of a diplomatic representative to Franco (this demand was accepted by the Czechoslovak Government within the next fortnight), (vi) normalisation of relations with Portugal (where deliveries of armaments from Czechoslovakia had been interrupted during the Spanish Civil War, with the consequent rupture of diplomatic relations by the Portuguese Government, which was co-operating with Franco).

Thus there were powerful forces working to adapt Czechoslovakia to Hitler's requirements, long before Munich, among the Czechoslovak parties themselves.

This needs to be borne constantly in mind, if the final outcome of the Anglo-Franco-German pressure on Czechoslovakia is to be understood. In particular, Beneš had not thrown aside the anti-Soviet ideas and anti-Communist policies of the past: although they were no longer dominant, they continued to exist and to exercise influence on his practical activity.

As early as the summer of 1936—barely twelve months after the signature of the Czechoslovak-Soviet Pact—Beneš had sent a memorandum to Gamelin underlining that he had expressly refused guarantees from the U.S.S.R. against an attack by Poland: nor would Czechoslovakia “assume any engagement to the neighbours of Poland against Poland”.<sup>3</sup> It was not, of course, that Beneš then feared an attack by Poland: he was leaving open the door (the terms of the Soviet-Czechoslovak treaty are not open to doubt) to an attack by Poland (of course not alone) on the U.S.S.R.—which, if France did not support the U.S.S.R., freed Czechoslovakia from any obligations.

This was at the time of the Franco rebellion in Spain, in which the

<sup>3</sup> Gamelin, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 236.



Polish Government supported the rebels, i.e. Mussolini and Hitler.

In October, 1937, the Henleinites had opened negotiations with Hodža about their demands. The German Minister began talks himself with Beneš. According to Eisenlohr's report, Beneš pointed out to him on November 9 that he had arranged for police collaboration between Czechoslovakia and Germany "last spring". Thereby he had shown that "he had entered into no engagement whatever with the Communists, but had rejected it in the most decisive manner".<sup>4</sup>

The previous day Mastný, the Czechoslovak Minister in Berlin, had at the Nazi Foreign Ministry also pointed out the contacts made by the police authorities of his country with those of Germany, "for defensive measures against Communism". Moreover, after a recent talk of his with Goebbels, German émigré (i.e. anti-Nazi) newspapers had been refused a licence for street sales, and further restrictions were being considered. On the 10th he told the Secretary of State that more émigré journals were being suppressed in the next few weeks (in fact, the *Neue Vorwaerts*, the chief newspaper of the German Social-Democrats in exile, had to be transferred to Paris early in 1938).<sup>5</sup>

Beneš, of course, could not know at the time that on November 5 Hitler had already decided to put an end to his country. Yet the experience of Spain, if nothing else, should by now have shown him that, by concerting action with Hitler against the Communists—who had behind them a considerable section of the working class—he was striking at the forces of resistance to Hitler's plans of conquest. So far from seeing this, he evidently extended his attempts to placate Hitler (at his own country's expense) into the field of foreign affairs. On February 16, 1938, we find Eisenlohr reporting, after another talk with Beneš: "His pact with Russia was the relic of a former epoch, but he could not just throw it into the wastepaper basket. He did not permit Communist propaganda, and he was willing to allow regular collaboration between his security police and ours, in order to discover and suppress such propaganda."<sup>6</sup>

This was four days after Schuschnigg's visit to Hitler at Berchtesgaden, which showed what "collaboration" with the Nazis meant. But it was not by chance that on January 12, making his annual report to the Berlin Foreign Ministry, Eisenlohr had noted: "The anti-Bolshevist propaganda put out by Germany and Italy has resulted in a disinclination to appear arm-in-arm with such a compromising ally."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> D.G.F.P., Vol. II, p. 40. This was not a special gesture for the benefit of the Nazis. On May 6, 1938, the Czechoslovak Government offered Poland joint action against Communists.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34, 68.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

Of course Beneš had not been entirely unaware of the danger to his country. As we have seen, he had resisted Hitler's attempts in 1936 to get him to permit unrestrained Nazi propaganda within Czechoslovakia, and to give up the pacts with France and the U.S.S.R. in exchange for a German "guarantee". After the occupation of Austria on March 11-12, of course, Beneš drew further conclusions. On March 29 the British military attaché in Prague reported that the general staff there were preparing for war, "because no terms acceptable to both parties are possible": and the nation was "very well organised for war".<sup>8</sup> The attaché was surprised that French and Soviet assurances of support were not being "seriously doubted". One reason for this confidence was that, when the Czechoslovak Minister in Moscow had, that month, raised the question of air assistance, "he had obtained immediate delivery of sixty bombers; twenty had already landed at Uzhgorod", he told the French Ambassador Coulondre.<sup>9</sup>

For all that, the anxious assurances which Beneš had given could not but reveal, to his Nazi opponents, a conflict of opinion within the leadership of the Czechoslovak State on which they could play, as Eisenlohr's dispatch of January 12 showed—a conflict not only between anti-German party and pro-German party, but within the minds of the bourgeois leaders of Czechoslovakia themselves. This cleavage was to show itself again and again in later months. While encouraging the Nazis, it increasingly paralysed the defence of the country or reduced its effectiveness—just because it led the Government as a rule to decide on action if the British and French Governments approved of it, and reject it if they disapproved.

Such, for example, was the decision to recognise the Italian conquest of Ethiopia on April 20: it was approved by the British and French Governments, and that was enough. Yet this could only be encouragement to further aggression—of which the Czechs knew that they were marked out as the next victim. At the end of April, too, Beneš told Noël, the French Ambassador in Warsaw, that he had no intention of concluding a military convention with the Soviet Union before France and Great Britain did so<sup>10</sup>—a gesture calculated, if nothing else did, to give confidence, for a further deal with Hitler at Czechoslovakia's expense, to those who had already made deals with Hitler and his associates at the expense of Ethiopia, Spain, China and lately Austria.

On May 17, Beneš told the British Minister as, in substance, he had

<sup>8</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, pp. 104-5, 107.

<sup>9</sup> Coulondre, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>10</sup> L. Noël, *l'Agression Allemande contre la Pologne* (1946), p. 200.



three months before told Eisenlohr, that "if Western Europe disinterested herself in Russia, Czechoslovakia would also be disinterested. His country would always follow and be bound to Western Europe, and never to Eastern Europe". Those had always been Masaryk's principles, and they would stand. Britain and France, however, needed Russia as a "balancing factor", and it would be disastrous to try and exclude her.<sup>11</sup>

Three days later, the military situation on Czechoslovakia's frontiers became so menacing that the Government without warning ordered the famous mobilisation of May 20-21. It was at that moment that Czechoslovakia, had the peril developed, needed the absolute certainty of quick and massive help. She received the necessary assurances, as we shall see, only from the Soviet Union, publicly as well as privately: from Western Europe she chiefly received signs of extreme irritation—even though accompanied by warnings to Germany to "lay off", for fear that worse might befall.

For the part played by the Czechoslovak Government at the subsequent stages of the negotiations at her expense by Germany on the one side, and Britain with France on the other, this internal division and conflict of purpose was decisive. On one hand, the Czechoslovak leaders wanted to maintain their country's independence: on the other, they were ready in practice to watch Hitler undermining it from within under the guise of "resistance to Communism" (as had already happened to Spain in one form and to Austria in another). On the one hand they knew that the real "balance" (or in plainer language resistance) to Hitler in their part of the world could come only from the Soviet Union—which had already shown where it stood, by the practical help it had given Spain and China. On the other hand, they knew that the British and French Governments were opposed to reliance on the Soviet Union—the Western Powers too had shown their position on this, particularly as regards Spain, but also after the *Anschluss* of Austria—and they wanted always "to follow and be bound to Western Europe". Such a combination of contradictory wishes and intentions in practice paralysed the Czechoslovak Government again and again, at critical moments.

## 2. Secret Paralysis

It was this paralysis that explains their acceptance of the barefaced interference in their internal affairs, both by the Germans and by the

<sup>11</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, pp. 314-15.

British and French Governments: the anxious preparation of the first, second, third and fourth "plans" between April and September—only almost immediately to abandon them: the meek acceptance of the Runciman mission in July and August: the fear, when the final crisis came, even of appealing to the League of Nations, where much publicity could have helped to restrain the zeal at least of their tormentors in Western Europe, if not of Hitler.

In this connection the case of the German-speaking population of the border districts—the so-called "Sudeten Germans"—is particularly interesting. Their grievances, although they existed, were certainly less than those of any national minority anywhere else in Europe. Their rights, and the effective use they were able to make of them, have already been described. It is worth reiterating that, so far as that of using their language is concerned, they were better off than the Bretons in France, or the Welsh in the United Kingdom. Months after the "Sudeten Germans" had been transferred to the rule of Hitler in the name of justice and self-determination, large bodies of Welshmen were vainly collecting signatures to a petition for the repeal of an English Act passed in the 16th century, prohibiting the use of Welsh in courts of law (it was only repealed in 1942).

Since the first months of the German Republic, in 1919, in fact—when the overthrow of the Kaiser had seemed to herald a period of the widest democracy in that country—there had been no movement in these districts for attachment to Germany. And even in 1938, before the Henlein party was allowed to spread terror far and wide, there was no popular demand for leaving Czechoslovakia and coming under Nazi rule.

Foreigners who were in Czechoslovakia during 1938 have left reports demonstrating this beyond all reasonable doubt. The French Minister in Prague reported on May 22: "The Sudeten had been duly answering the call to the colours, and had been making no difficulties about it."

On May 30, a special correspondent of *The Times* cabled to his paper: "During a tour of 180 miles to-day, I was unable to find evidence of tension or strained nerves among the Sudeten German population." This was the time of renewed German propaganda activities after the mobilisation of May 21; yet in the large town of Gablonz, with a mixed population, just as in the country districts, he found freedom for the Henlein propaganda everywhere.

On August 30, at the height of the German propaganda about Czech "terrorism", *The Times* Prague correspondent cabled: "Among



the Sudeten Germans there is little of the jingoism portrayed in some foreign newspapers." They were mostly heartily sick of the dispute, and they feared that the brunt of any war would fall on them.

The disgust of the Nazi Embassy officials and others, between September 16 and 20, at finding that the population of the country districts had heaved a sigh of relief when the Henleinist "putsch" collapsed, and its leaders had fled, has already been described in Chapter IV.

On October 2, after the settlement of Munich, the *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* correspondent at Prague wrote that thousands of pro-Henlein Germans had felt themselves betrayed by the annexation of the frontier districts, and gave interviews with businessmen and others to support his statement. In addition, of course, there were the scores of thousands of Social-Democrats, Communists and members of other anti-Nazi organisations, for whom annexation of the territories meant torture, death or the concentration camp.<sup>12</sup>

Where, then, was the secret of the immense popularity of Henlein and his party, of the fact that these districts were plastered with posters and banners and portraits of Henlein for months before the annexation? The answer is simple, yet can be vouched for by every non-Nazi observer who visited the country between April and September, 1938.

The Henlein organisation was allowed by the Prague authorities to build up unchecked a complete machinery of dual authority in the German-speaking districts, to reinforce the prestige of that machine by moral terrorism without any counter-campaign by the Czechoslovak Government, and to follow up the moral terrorism by economic terrorism in the factories and other places of work.

Anti-Nazi shopkeepers were boycotted, anti-Nazi workers dismissed, non-political workers found leaflets threatening them with dire penalties if they did not join the Henlein party, lying at their place of work in the mornings—leaflets which could only have been distributed with the management's sanction—children of anti-Nazi parents were persecuted in the schools, threatening demonstrations were held at night outside the houses of known anti-Nazis, anonymous letters threatening death to Henlein's opponents were thrust through letter-boxes under cover of darkness, gangs in Henlein uniform (which was nominally prohibited) roused Czech workmen at night to warn them to leave the territory. In short, any foreigner might well have been excused for thinking, in the months of June, July and August, that

<sup>12</sup> The books by Mr. Gedye and Mr. Henderson, already mentioned, publish much other evidence on all these aspects, observed personally by the writer also.

he was not in Czechoslovakia, but in some territory conquered by Germany.

Side by side with this was the open flaunting of the machinery of dual power built up by the Henlein party, on resources which must partially have come from Germany, and in any case on lines which everyone knew were closely co-ordinated with those of similar services in Germany. Already in May and June one could not enter the smallest village in the German-speaking districts, or go through the streets of quiet country towns, without seeing at every street corner, at the entrance to the village, one or more young men in the black and grey uniform which thinly camouflaged the dress of the future storm-troopers, watching for any unusual occurrence, taking the numbers of unfamiliar motor-cars, being replaced at regular intervals by reliefs, and so forth. As one approached the frontier, one met or was passed by young men in black leather uniforms, mounted on powerful red motor-cycles, with dispatch pouches and map cases strapped across their chests, hastening to and from the German frontier—which they could cross on the simple production of their passport or other papers, without let or hindrance from the Czechoslovak frontier officials.

The latter were strictly forbidden to interfere. Similarly the police prefects had equally strict instructions to ignore the activities of the Henlein storm-troopers, and the local police had rigid orders not to notice the provocative wearing of prohibited uniforms and display of the Hitler salute. The commanders of local garrisons were instructed that their men, even if assaulted in the public streets, must not resist, but should for preference be kept in barracks.

Already by July 11 the *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* Prague correspondent could report that "camouflaged storm-troop organisations" were maintaining day and night patrols in the border districts, as before May 21. The *Havas Agency* reported on August 23 that at Mariánské Lázně (Marienbad), when Henlein held a conference of his principal supporters, the streets were guarded in broad daylight by uniformed "protection squads"—who, the same Agency reported on August 30, had black breeches, ties and heavy boots like the German S.S., a badge like that of the S.S., and marched through the streets performing the goosestep.

To-day we know more. For example, we know that about August 1 the German air attaché in Prague, by direction of the Luftwaffe headquarters in Berlin, reconnoitred the countryside round Freudenthal to select possible sites for airfields. He himself, of course, was in mufti, but he was accompanied by the local leader of Henlein's "Freikorps",



a reservist on leave in the uniform of the Czechoslovak army—which, he noted, was excellent camouflage.<sup>13</sup> Or again, we know now that on August 23, the German authorities had before them a record showing that since 1935 the “Sudeten German Party” had had 15,000 marks a month from the Berlin Foreign Ministry for its activities, of which 12,000 marks came to it from the German Legation and 3000 marks came direct to its representative in Berlin: and the latter now had his allowance raised to 5500 marks a month.<sup>14</sup>

Is it surprising, and does it need any explanation of outraged national feeling, that the local population should have come to the conclusion that force and power were on the side of the Nazis whose agents they could see in their midst, and whose dire threats against Czechoslovakia they could hear all day long on their wireless; and not on the side of a government at Prague which, to all intents and purposes, did not exist except in name, so far as local daily life was concerned? Is it surprising that the vast majority of non-political people should have come to the conclusion that support and cheers for Henlein were the safer part, whatever their own personal inclinations?

Yet on two crucial occasions the population of the Sudeten districts gave a clear manifestation of its lack of any real enthusiasm for the Henlein cause. One already mentioned was after the mobilisation of May 21, in which the young German-speaking reservists answered the call cheerfully, with an infinitesimal number of exceptions, and all foreign eye-witnesses testified to the relief of the local population. The second was after the concerted attacks by Henleinist storm-troopers, supported by shock groups from across the frontier, in approximately forty towns and villages along the border on the night of September 12, after Hitler's speech at Nuremberg. The experience of every other popular movement in history shows that this would have been the occasion, if ever there was one, for a mass outbreak of the population behind the sheltered shock-troops which actually seized police stations and other public buildings on that night. Yet no such movement occurred, and the people remained passive and unsympathetic spectators of the murder and arson committed by the raiders, notwithstanding the fact that, as the *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* correspondent wrote from Karlovy Vary in his graphic description (September 14) of the outbreaks which he had personally witnessed, orders had been given by the Czechoslovak Government to offer no resistance to the terrorists. At Falkenau, for example, “it seemed to be carrying self-restraint on the part of the Czechs to the limit when

<sup>13</sup> *Trial*, part II, p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 594-5.

they” (two gendarmes attacked by the Henleinites) “discovered on leaving the town that the barracks on the outskirts were full of troops who were not allowed to go out”.

The fact is that the middle-class Radicals who stood at the helm of Czechoslovak democracy in the party of President Beneš, in alliance with the leaders of the Catholic Party and the Social-Democratic Parties, were bent up to the very end on tolerating this open terrorism, and made other sweeping concessions to Germany, not only because of Agrarian pressure, but above all for fear of alienating the sympathy of the British and French Governments. In the message which has just been quoted, the well-known British journalist who marvelled at the passivity of the Czechoslovak authorities remarked that it was “apparently in accordance with the wishes of their foreign advisers”.

Not only was it that, but it provided those advisers with the very material they needed to build up their case for presenting the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia as a matter of self-determination. As one turns nowadays over the hundreds of pages of the *Documents on British Foreign Policy* for this period, one hears a ceaseless lament over the hard fate of the “Sudeten Germans” and the “obstinacy” of the Czechs who won't let them go: more well-bred in tone, perhaps, than the unrestrained screeching and grotesque lies of the similar volumes on *German Foreign Policy*, but equally unscrupulous. Particularly when it came from men who would never have dreamed of giving, say, Cypriots or Algerians—or at that time Indians and Egyptians—the rights they were demanding for the “Sudetens”.

The extraordinary liberality of which Czechoslovakia's “foreign advisers” took advantage went very far. High officers of the army would privately tell the foreigner what iron self-restraint they had to impose on their men and themselves, to ensure the fulfilment of War Office instructions, although they could see the building up of a “fifth column” before their very eyes. A symptom of the complete impunity which the friends of what was virtually an enemy Power felt in Czechoslovakia was the incident, reported by the Prague correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* on June 2, in which a well-known British friend of the German Chancellor's, Miss Unity Mitford, was allowed to travel throughout the border districts with a portrait of Hitler prominently displayed on her car, together with swastika badges, and was only stopped by a crowd acting on its own, the intervention of authority being limited to a request by a police official to produce her papers.

The attitude in the highest quarters, when journalists of many



nationalities expressed their surprise at such a state of affairs, was invariably the same. "Yes, you tell us what everyone tells us, we know that if we were to arrest Henlein and a couple of dozen of his principal assistants, his movement would be ready to collapse. We agree that the Henlein machine is an alien apparatus, built up by foreign organisers on foreign money, and has no real roots among the mass of the German-speaking population. But if we were to touch it, the English and French Governments would be displeased with us. And you see we must not quarrel if possible with England and France. We rely on them for help, if matters become critical."<sup>15</sup>

Even responsible members of the Agrarian Party did not conceal—in private conversation<sup>16</sup>—that there was ample evidence available for the prosecution of Henlein on grounds of high treason, and that such a blow would be decisive for his organisation. But the mere idea of such proceedings caused them the greatest alarm, partly because it would "provoke Hitler" but mainly and above all because it would "alienate the British and French": on whom, they explained, even the "moderate" elements in Czechoslovakia must rely, to resist too great demands from Germany in the final settlement.

It was this attitude on the part of both Right and "Left" sections of the Government coalition that explained such facts as the constant toleration shown to the Henlein paper published in Prague itself, the *Zeit*. Day by day it reprinted extracts from the abusive leading articles of the Berlin newspapers—although the latter were prohibited in Czechoslovakia by reason of those very articles—while the mildest criticism of the German Government was visited with the penalties of last-minute deletions by the press censors, blank spaces on the front pages of the Left newspapers, and threats of suppression (the rule was: suppression after three "warnings" from the Agrarian Minister of the Interior). On the night of September 21-22—when the people were demonstrating in the streets against the acceptance of dismemberment—the police occupied the printing works of *Rude Pravo*, the Communist paper. It came out in the morning with its front page blank, except for two headings: "Let Parliament and the people decide! The Soviet Union is with us in all circumstances!"<sup>17</sup>

If this was the price paid in policy at home for the hope of ultimate Anglo-French support, it is scarcely to be wondered at that the

<sup>15</sup> Beneš himself said this to the writer in June, 1938, in his study in Prague Castle.

<sup>16</sup> Such as the writer had, within a few days of the talk with Beneš, with the head of the Czechoslovak Telegraph Agency and a responsible official of the President's staff.

<sup>17</sup> Matveyev, *Proval Mюнхенской Политики*, 1938-39 (Moscow, 1955), p. 85.

Czechoslovak Government needed very little persuasion from its "foreign advisers" to go a very long way in its concessions to demands from abroad.

The closer the final crisis approached, the more inconsequential appears the policy which the Government pursued.

Right up to the beginning of September, as Litvinov revealed publicly in his speech at the League Assembly,<sup>18</sup> the Czechoslovak Government had not even enquired at Moscow whether the Soviet Union would fulfil its obligations under the pact: much less arranged for staff talks. In private, Beneš at the time (August 24 and 25) was assuring the Henleinite leaders that if there were a *modus vivendi* with Germany, "in practice the question of the pact with Russia would lose all actuality". He was only afraid of two things, he told them—"a war and, after it, a Bolshevik revolution": and then again followed the reminiscences intended to placate the determined assassins of his country. "Masaryk and he had been the first to make anti-Bolshevik speeches. His first speech after the Peace Conference had attacked the Bolsheviks."<sup>19</sup>

Only on September 19 (Litvinov revealed in the same speech)—i.e. when presented by the British and French Governments with the demand that it should commit suicide—did the Czechoslovak Government overcome its hesitations for a brief moment, and formally enquire whether the U.S.S.R. would fulfil its obligations under the pact. The reply received was completely positive. But by then, as we now know, the foreign friends had settled, in full session at Downing Street, the fate of Czechoslovakia. "When at last B.-W." (Barrington Ward, assistant editor of *The Times*) "met Hoare" (First Lord of the Admiralty, who had spent all day with Chamberlain, Halifax and Simon on the 16th, and now had been in the Cabinet all day on the 17th) "he learnt that . . . after discussion, the Cabinet had agreed that Czechoslovakia was disintegrating already and it was not worth a war to stop the process".<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Thwarting the People's Will

In reality, there was no disintegration. Not only had the Henleinite rising fizzled out, but in the days immediately following the Government had had a series of assurances of loyalty from important sections of the German-speaking population: the Social-Democrats, the smaller

<sup>18</sup> Litvinov, *Against Aggression* (London, 1939), p. 129.

<sup>19</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, pp. 640-2.

<sup>20</sup> *History of "The Times"*, vol. IV, part 2, p. 938.

bourgeois parties which earlier had been swept into the Henleinite net, the joint body representing democratic youth organisations of many creeds, and finally even the ex-Austrian nobility. The people of the Czech regions—Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia—had already demonstrated in many scores of thousands throughout the country, in protest against foreign interference, during the first days of June and again at the beginning of August.<sup>21</sup> It was at the time of the two mobilisations, however, that the contrast between people and Government was sharpest.

On the night of May 20-21 and during the following days the common people responded to the call for mobilisation, and for self-defence if need be, with genuine enthusiasm. Moreover, this enthusiasm was not limited to the reservists or to their families. Responsible army officers, trained in a school of hostility to politics, and particularly to the working-class organisations, were moved to tears by the spontaneous offers that poured in upon them, from trade union branches, unemployed organisations, local units of the Social-Democratic and Communist Parties, to dig trenches, supply guards for undefended outposts, provide comforts for the troops in the frontier fortifications and so on.

At the important garrison town of Liberec (Reichenberg), for example, where the local unemployed organisation had supplied extra labour for work on fortifications after May 21—the garrison commander could not appeal to the Nazi-controlled labour exchange—the labourers, by unanimous vote at a mass meeting held on completion of the work, decided not to accept a penny of the pay which the garrison treasurer had prepared, but to content themselves with their usual unemployment benefit: on the ground that this was work for the defence of the Republic. In the same district, on the night of May 21, the local Communists and Socialists organised a voluntary guard, armed with a few odd weapons they had secured, which manned on their own initiative one frontier position of some importance, left unoccupied by the military. They reported to the garrison commander the following morning, earnestly pressing him to send a small detachment of troops there in future, but affirming their complete willingness to go on bearing the burden themselves if there were not enough troops.

"You know, I am a professional officer. I have been in the army more than twenty years. I fought against the Russians in 1918. I had no idea that the Communists were like that," said the garrison

<sup>21</sup> Matveyev, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

commander, tears in his eyes, to me a few weeks after these events.

The same kind of thing occurred in other border areas.

It must be remembered, too, that from May onwards the people of Czechoslovakia were increasingly buoyed up by the news which began to percolate of the arrivals of Soviet war material that could not be hidden. One sunny morning early in June, 1938, the writer (who had arrived a few hours earlier from Geneva) was being given coffee at Barrandov, on a hill above Prague, overlooking a river valley where thousands of people were bathing and taking the sun. Suddenly a distant murmur began, rolling rapidly towards us and becoming a roar of cheering. All in the restaurant rushed to the glassed-in terrace. Three huge four-engined Soviet bombers—no one who had ever seen them could be mistaken—with the colours of the Czechoslovak Republic on the wings, were flying up the valley. On the grassy slopes beneath every man, woman and child was on his or her feet, waving, cheering and—some—dancing. It was an exciting experience for one's first morning in Prague, particularly for a fellow-citizen of Mr. Chamberlain's—and also of William Gallacher's.

Nor did the spirit of the people diminish as the danger became more manifest. On September 9, for example, the *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* printed a dispatch from its Prague correspondent describing the huge demonstrations of protest all over the country when the terms of the Beneš plan became known: and the avalanche of telegrams which poured in upon Government leaders from thousands of organisations and meetings, protesting their readiness to defend the country against all odds. Two days later, while Goering was uttering his threats and describing the irresistible might of German arms, great demonstrations of loyalty to the Republic were held by Czechs and Germans alike all over the Sudeten districts, in which scores of thousands participated.

When the news that the Hodža Government had accepted the Berchtesgaden terms became known on the evening of September 21, what one British Conservative journalist called a "tide of national indignation" broke out, which drove the Government out of office. Spontaneous demonstrations, in which hundreds of thousands took part, had formed in the central streets of Prague and had continued far into the night, to demand: "Arms for the people! Defend the frontiers! Down with the capitulators!" A political general strike of 250,000 workmen broke out on the morning of September 22 at all the big factories. "Bearing the national colours, the workers marched into Prague in disciplined columns. At 10 a.m. a number of Deputies of



all parties, except the Agrarians,<sup>22</sup> appeared on the balcony, and the announcement of resignation was made through loud-speakers. The scene of enthusiasm that ensued was indescribable. There have been no such demonstrations in the Republic's history since those which accompanied the restoration of national liberty in 1918.

"The announcement took the form of a statement that the Hodža Government would be succeeded by a Government of National Defence on a broad basis, with a strong military admixture. The news enabled the Czech people to breathe again. The burden of restraint on their freedom to defend themselves, which had weighed upon them ever since the arrival of the Runciman mission, and the endless series of concessions which in consequence they were forced to make to Germany—only to find that each was made a stepping-stone for still more far-reaching demands—seemed to them to have been lifted from their shoulders.

"The cheers for the Army and for the idea of defending the frontiers seemed as though they would never end" (*Daily Telegraph and Morning Post*, September 23). Similar strikes and demonstrations took place in many towns throughout Czechoslovakia.

The announcement of general mobilisation (all men up to 40, or thirty-five out of forty-five divisions available)—issued by radio in the five languages of Czechoslovakia on the evening of September 23 (the writer heard it in Geneva, the most unexpected and the most thrilling broadcast since the description of the entry of the International Brigade to defend Madrid, by the radio of the Spanish Republic on November 8, 1936)—was met by the people with an immense demonstration of enthusiasm. Men were pouring from houses and cinemas, from work and from cafés, the trams were packed with them (the conductors calling on non-reservists to get off), taxis and private cars were filled with men hurrying to the call-up points—all within a few minutes.<sup>23</sup> Coming after the protest demonstrations of the 21st and 22nd, this was an unequalled demonstration of the people against the foreign enemies of their Republic, of their readiness and their well-deserved confidence in their strength, which astounded their false friends once again. By the 24th mobilisation of the four armies of the Republic was complete. The Czech general staff estimated that Germany could not spare more than about seventy-five divisions to attack

<sup>22</sup> A Communist deputy had to appeal for a hearing for the spokesman of the Slovak Agrarians.

<sup>23</sup> The description of these scenes in Gedye's *Fallen Bastions* (pp. 470-3) is one of the most politically enlightening passages in the book—as well as brilliant eye-witness journalism.

them if the French co-operated—Newton reports on September 27, a superiority of 2 to 1 "which is not excessive"<sup>24</sup>—(in reality, the Germans had substantially less, as will be shown later). The military attaché on whose opinion he relied "does not consider the morale of the Czechoslovak army is low": the head of the Intelligence services of the French army had told the British military attaché in Paris, about the same time, that it was "high".<sup>25</sup>

The people were united, the danger from the "Sudetens" grossly exaggerated, the army was determined, its training and mechanisation were far beyond those of any other army in Central Europe,<sup>26</sup> the economic resources of the country, particularly in heavy industry, were (for its size but also absolutely) very great, its mountain fortifications gave good opportunities for a defensive war, the Soviet Union at any rate was willing to come to its aid from the first shot. British and French opposition was to be expected at first—that was obvious: but the spectacle of the struggle, an immediate appeal to world opinion at the League of Nations under more favourable conditions than the Spanish Republic had had, and worldwide hatred of the Nazis, might overcome the Chamberlains and Daladiers.

What was lacking? Determination of the national leaders.

First, there was the fear of treason from the Agrarians. That there was ground for this in previous experience is now not to be doubted. Informed testimony is unanimous that it reappeared at the critical moment—when the Czechoslovak Government on September 21 had to make up its mind what to do about the Anglo-French terms. "The Cabinet wants to reject and to rely on Russia and Rumania, but some of the extreme Right Agrarians threaten if Russian help is demanded to invite Hitler to march in", Gedye heard at the ancient Hradschin (Castle) of Prague in the early hours of the 21st, while waiting for the Cabinet decision.<sup>27</sup> "Dr. Hodža and the Ministers of the Interior and Defence, all members of the Agrarian Party, were opposed to resistance with Russia as a sole ally, and the Bureau of the Agrarian Party was strongly of the same opinion", writes Wheeler-Bennett, who was also in Prague at the time.<sup>28</sup> Beneš in his memoirs refers to "the preparations for open treason by some elements in the homeland, and my serious doubts about the attitude of some of our Agrarians".<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 567.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 581-2, 609-10.

<sup>26</sup> "The motorised equipment of the Czechoslovak Army is greatly superior to that possessed by the Germans. Knowledgeable Czechs expressed the deepest contempt for the German material which rolled into Prague last week", wrote *The Times* correspondent on March 24, 1939—nine days after the Germans had occupied Prague.

<sup>27</sup> *Fallen Bastions*, pp. 462-3.

<sup>28</sup> *Munich, Prologue to Tragedy*, p. 128.

<sup>29</sup> *Memoirs* (English edition, 1954), p. 273.

But this treasonable "attitude", and the threats to "call in Hitler"—were they really so dangerous that they could not have been disposed of by arresting a dozen or so of those Agrarian leaders who were responsible for them? Let the reader set these "threats" against the spirit of the people on the 21st and 22nd, described by the journalists who were on the spot. It can hardly be doubted that, if the Government had announced that it had rejected the Anglo-French terms, was appealing to the U.S.S.R. and to France to stand by their treaties and had requested an emergency meeting of the League Council forthwith under Article 11 of the Covenant, providing for action in case of a "threat of war": *and at the same time that it had arrested a group of politicians and others who had threatened high treason*: the people of Czechoslovakia would have welcomed the news. Where were Hodža and his Agrarian politicians twenty-four hours later, after the great demonstrations and general strike of September 21-22? How was it that the crowds would not listen to the Agrarians? What would they have done if Beneš, or someone on his behalf, had announced, not only that a new Government of National Defence was being formed, but that such-and-such politicians had been excluded from it because they had opposed resistance out of hatred for the U.S.S.R.?

But the tragic truth was that among those ruling politicians who were *not* Agrarians the will to resist—if it meant resisting with the Soviet Union at their side—was long since dead as well. Of this, too, there has been some evidence in previous pages. In the days of decision it played the decisive part. The evidence is unmistakable.

General Syrový, Inspector-General of the army, had been one of the organisers of the Czechoslovak insurrection against the young Soviet power in 1918. He told Wheeler-Bennett in August: "We shall fight the Germans, either alone, or with you and the French, but we don't want the Russians in here. We should never get them out."<sup>30</sup>

It is at this time, too, that General Gamelin instructed Faucher, head of the French military mission in Prague, to advise the Czechoslovak high command to "study the question of Soviet aid", in which Gamelin promised his good services. But, he writes, Faucher on August 29 met considerable hesitation on the part of Krejčí, the chief of the Czechoslovak general staff. He realised the necessity of Russian co-operation, but "feared that this gesture, if it were known, would serve as a pretext for the Germans". One might have expected that

<sup>30</sup> *Munich, Prologue to Tragedy*, pp. 81-2. The Soviet troops left Czechoslovakia in December, 1945, within a very few months of the end of the second world war.

men thinking of real resistance to invasion would not have worried about that, at such a time.<sup>31</sup>

But although Syrový was invested by Beneš with the Premiership in place of Hodža, in the early morning of September 21—a Benešite in place of an Agrarian—he did not fight the Germans, either alone or with the Western Allies: he became their collaborator during the occupation, and in 1947 got a twenty-year sentence. The official explanation by Beneš and his followers was a different one. "It would have been more than dangerous to ask Russia to help us independently of France and the League of Nations, for Britain and France, who were supporting German claims in the dispute, and who were therefore opposing us, would have considered such Russian intervention on our behalf as a dangerous expansion of 'Bolshevism' in Europe. In the 'ideological war' which might have ensued—for that is how it would immediately have been described in the German propaganda—the Powers of the West would have undoubtedly sympathised with the Berlin-Rome axis, as the defenders of 'order and European civilisation' against 'Bolshevik disruption and decay'. . . . (The Czechoslovak Government) did not want to make it possible for Germany to declare a 'crusade against Bolshevism'. The Czechoslovak Government realised that, should this happen, the Western Powers, whose relations with Soviet Russia had been a trifle cold of late, might decide to adopt a passive attitude or perhaps even an attitude actively hostile to the Czechoslovak Republic. This attitude, we considered, might be adopted by Britain and France with Soviet Russia our only ally", wrote one of Beneš' closest associates, Hubert Ripka, a few months later.<sup>32</sup>

But the Czechoslovak Government had known of this hostility to the U.S.S.R. all along. "A trifle cold" is a curious expression to use of the British and French Governments' attitude to the U.S.S.R. in the years 1936 to 1938. If this hostility was to be their sole guide, these words could only mean that the independence and vital interests of their own people had long ago been put second in the Czechoslovak Government's eyes to getting the approval of Chamberlain and Daladier. And indeed certain documents quoted earlier bear this out. One may leave aside the question of whether the disapproval of the British and French Governments would count for very much if the whole power of the Soviet Union came into play against Nazi Germany, including its possible satellites. But all Ripka's argument does not explain why, *long before* matters reached this point, his friends

<sup>31</sup> Gamelin, *op. cit.*, p. 341.

<sup>32</sup> *Munich, Before and After*, pp. 83, 146.



were busily explaining both to the British and French and to the Germans that they, too, wanted no truck with "Communism" or with "Russia". Yet they did not tell this to their people—or even to the Soviet Union.

The conclusion is irresistible. On the one hand, they wanted to use the threat of Soviet support for diplomatic bargaining with the Germans, as long as they could, and to keep up the morale of their people for as long as was necessary. But on the other hand, actually safeguarding the independence of their people with the help of the Soviet Union (in war, if needs be) was contrary to their intentions, and they preferred to see their people go under Hitler's yoke to such a way out. Where then was the difference in substance—as opposed to difference in words—between their position and that of the Agrarians?

One can hardly take seriously Beneš' final argument that "above all", or what weighed with him, was "the inevitable and foreseeable complications for the Soviet Union, as well as ourselves, if we had gone to war against the express wishes of Great Britain and France!"<sup>33</sup> After all, the Soviet Union had moved near to going to war in Spain, and again in China, very much against the "express wishes" of those two Powers in the first case and—judging by their behaviour in 1937 and 1938—against their unexpressed wishes in the second. . . . One must imagine that from May to September, 1938, it was not very difficult to realise (in Moscow no more so than in Prague) the consequences for the Soviet Union if it carried out its pledges of support for Czechoslovakia, in the teeth of both the express threats of Hitler and the express wishes of the British and French Governments.

Winston Churchill's opinion is of interest here: "I have always believed that Beneš was wrong to yield. He should have defended his fortress line. Once fighting had begun, in my opinion at that time, France would have moved to his aid in a surge of national passion, and Britain would have rallied to France almost immediately." Churchill does not mention the U.S.S.R.: but he does describe how a meeting of his Tory friends on September 26 "focused on the point, 'We must get Russia in'".<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, he does not give a single quotation from any statement of his own between May and September, 1938, i.e. from before the Czechoslovak mobilisation right up to Chamberlain's departure for Berchtesgaden, in which he publicly expressed such a view—which, coming from such an imperialist and old enemy of the U.S.S.R., would have weighed very much with the Czechs. Nor does he attempt to explain this omission.

<sup>33</sup> Beneš, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

<sup>34</sup> Churchill, *op. cit.*, pp. 237, 242.

Meanwhile, everything was done to frighten the people with this "danger", and at the same time to make sure that the people did nothing to raise the question of co-operation with the U.S.S.R. During the critical hours of September 21-22, the Communists were again refused admission to the new Government, and an approach by the Communist leader Gottwald to the Social-Democrats for a working-class alliance to become its nucleus was rejected. At first the Government had recourse to deliberate misrepresentation. In its broadcast at 7 p.m. on the 21st it declared that "we were left alone", because the Soviet Union could only help if France did so, "or alternatively *not until* Germany had been declared an aggressor by the League of Nations". This was untrue—since the Soviet Union had months before stated precisely, and had recently renewed the promise, that it would help immediately if Czechoslovakia fought: no other condition was laid down. Immediately afterwards the untruth was repeated, in a broadcast by Vavrečka, Minister of Propaganda, which said that Czechoslovakia's allies "left us alone and unsupported".<sup>35</sup> When the crowds on the night of the 21st were shouting: "We will not surrender our frontiers!", "Mobilise!", Syrový replied to them: "You do not know the causes which forced the Government to make its decisions. We cannot lead the nation to suicide"<sup>36</sup>—statements calculated to deepen the impression that Czechoslovakia had been abandoned by the Soviet Union as well. But the manoeuvre was carried further.

The new Government formed the following morning represented no change of political leadership or of policy, Ripka points out. "The only importance of the change of Government lay in its psychological influence on the public," he admits<sup>37</sup>—that is, to keep the people quiet. This was not what the people thought it meant, of course—but their wrong impression was heightened by Syrový's first declaration to the huge crowd before the Parliament building—a document which Ripka does not print.<sup>38</sup> "I guarantee that the Army stands and will stand on our frontiers to defend our liberty to the last. Do not let any internal enemies inspire the idea that the army could change its attitude. I may soon call upon you here to take an active part in the defence of our country in which we all long to join." Now everyone could join in "the last preparations to meet the inevitable onslaught of a mighty enemy", Gedye comments—and so no doubt

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Ripka, *op. cit.*, pp. 106, 108.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>38</sup> Gedye, *op. cit.*, p. 467; and *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post*, September 23, 1938.

did the people. Beneš heightened the impression in his broadcast that night by mysterious and encouraging phrases: "I have no fear now for the future of our State. I have made plans for all eventualities. . . . If it should be necessary to fight, we will know how to do so to the last breath."<sup>39</sup> What could any Czechoslovak citizen understand by these words, but that—now that the Hodža Government had gone—his Government was prepared to lead him in war, if necessary (the mobilisation on the evening of the 23rd seemed to confirm this), and with at any rate (after the Soviet warning to the Poles on the morning of the 23rd) support assured from the Soviet Union?

This support had been further assured by Litvinov's speeches at Geneva, on the 21st and 23rd—with their precise reiteration of Soviet pledges, and the public hint, to those who studied it (and significantly enough, Ripka in his book leaves out the sentence containing the hint), that it might come to the aid of Czechoslovakia "in virtue of a voluntary decision on its part".<sup>40</sup> Could any rank-and-file Czechoslovak citizen suppose that this assistance was being rejected? It is not surprising that, as late as September 28th, the foreign military experts quoted earlier found that the morale of the Czechoslovak armed forces was high.

But in reality the offer of Soviet help was being rejected. This forced the leaders on September 30th out into the open—though very reluctantly. In any case, the younger and most vigorous elements of the nation, including the working class which had risen up so effectively on September 22, were now scattered far and wide, in their military units, either at the frontiers or in the strategic reserves massed at different points within the country. The German troops were to begin their march into Czechoslovakia next day, when argument would be too late.

#### 4. Soviet Aid Rejected

At first the Government, in its afternoon communiqué announcing acceptance of the Munich decisions, did not go beyond emphasising that "the responsible factors of the political parties" were unanimous in this (they did not of course count the Communists), that this was done "to preserve the nation", and that "any other decision is to-day impossible". Later in the afternoon, Syrový spoke, first repeating the lie that "we stood alone", promising that "the territories which will remain to us will give us the possibility of further cultural and

<sup>39</sup> Ripka, *op. cit.*, p. III.

<sup>40</sup> League of Nations *Official Journal*. Special Supplement No. 189 (Geneva, 1938), p. 34. In private, as will be seen, the Soviet offer was more than a hint.

economic progress" (which every Czech knew to be a lie) and appealing that "there should be no conflict within our ranks". An army order from Krejčí, chief of the general staff, then added that "Western Europe has asked this sacrifice from us categorically, in order to prevent world war".<sup>41</sup>

Gedye has recorded that "the army, standing to its guns with splendid spirit out on the frontier, had . . . not the faintest idea that such a blow could fall. Within an hour from the reading of this order, and the further detailed orders for evacuation, the morale of the splendid and unweakened force had gone. . . . For a while at least, discipline broke down."<sup>42</sup> Only when this had happened did the Government at last feel strong enough to give its true reasons to the people.

Dérér, the Minister of Justice up to September 22, was given time on the radio to say: "Betrayed by all who promised us help, relying solely upon Soviet Russia, we should be placed in great danger by the outbreak of war. Czechoslovakia could be accused of being the tool of Soviet Russia, and our neighbours, including the Western States, would regard this war as a war of Communism against European civilisation. We should have been faced with the open hostility of the whole of the West." And Vavrečka, now Minister without Portfolio, said on the radio on October 2 (according to a *Havas* message from Prague of the same date): "Soviet Russia was without any doubt ready to go to war. But our war by the side of Russia would have been not only a war against Germany. All Europe, including France and Britain, would have considered it as a war of Bolshevism against Europe. Perhaps all Europe would have gone to war against Russia and against us."

Without returning to the earlier discussion of these arguments, it is sufficient to say that the Czechoslovak Government was now quite safe in using them, because there was scarcely anyone in a position now openly to contradict. In fact, however, the mass of the working class, the peasantry and the "man in the street" generally, had shown themselves more than once quite prepared to dare these dangers, real or imaginary. The recently-opened archives of the Ministry of National Defence show that the mass of the army, only a week before called from its civilian jobs, was ready to dare them too, and bitterly resented the surrender of their country's great defences to the enemy.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Ripka, *op. cit.*, pp. 231-3.

<sup>42</sup> Gedye, *op. cit.*, pp. 487-8.

<sup>43</sup> Kral, *op. cit.*, pp. 268-9, quotes confidential reports by military commanders bearing witness to these feelings.



Even in the wave of defeatism, capitulation, and abjuring of past faiths, which swept through all the bourgeois political parties of Czechoslovakia after Munich and which led immediately to the triumph of the pro-Nazi Agrarians (in Slovakia, of open Fascists), one remarkable phenomenon showed that, under the surface, a different process was going on. This was the establishment of trade union unity in the principal factories, by pressure from the workers themselves for the establishment of united factory committees—an end which twenty years of Czechoslovak democracy had seemed powerless to accomplish, and which had left the important Czechoslovak working class divided between Social-Democratic, Revolutionary, National-Socialist (Benešite), Catholic and Agrarian unions at the critical period of its existence. Had it been able earlier to speak with a united voice, and with the machinery of trade unionism at its disposal, it might have changed the entire political situation, at all events after September 21.

This movement began on the initiative of the Communist Party—"the only Party which was consistently opposed to capitulation to Germany", by the reluctant testimony of one of its opponents.<sup>44</sup> On October 11, 1938, speaking in the National Assembly on the real reasons for Munich, its leader Klement Gottwald stated them as follows:

"They were the class interests of the reactionary big bourgeoisie of Britain and France, for which the Hitlerite régime was saved at Munich at the expense of Czechoslovakia. They were the reactionary forces of the big bourgeoisie of Czechoslovakia, at the dictation of which capitulation took place, and the interests of the State and the Republic were sacrificed to its class interests. We are dealing here with a large-scale conspiracy against the people, against the Republic and against democracy."<sup>45</sup>

Ten days later the new pro-Nazi Government of Czechoslovakia prohibited all activity by the Communist Party.

#### A NOTE ON AMERICAN POLICY

"Hitler was perfectly safe in discounting the influence of the United States", is a typical verdict by United States historians on American

<sup>44</sup> Ripka, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Grachev, *Pomoshch S.S.S.R. Narodam Chehoslovakii v ih Borbe za Svobodu i Nezavisimost* (Moscow, 1953), pp. 20-1.

policy in 1938.<sup>1</sup> "We could have taken a stiffer and more resolute attitude against Hitler's encroachments and provocations", writes George F. Kennan. Firmness when he re-occupied the Rhineland might have forced him to be more circumspect, firmness at the time of Munich "might have resulted in Hitler's overthrow".<sup>2</sup>

The conclusion which the reader is clearly intended to draw from these and similar reflections is that United States policy during 1938 was a passive one, and if concerned about Hitler's aggression, unable to make up its mind to take action against them. At the very outset, on March 14, Sumner Welles told the Czechoslovak Minister "that this Government had taken no action, had made no representations and intended to make none".<sup>3</sup>

In reality United States policy was not at all passive; and far from wavering in the choice between merely condemning Hitler's aggressions and taking action against them, it gave constant encouragement to them in practice, and only hesitated and drew back when it showed its hand too openly. And its general line of encouragement to Hitler was to say: don't pursue your conquest by violence if you can achieve it by negotiation. While the documents published by the State Department are more than usually "trimmed" and expurgated, so much is obvious.<sup>4</sup>

On May 12 the British Ambassador in Berlin submitted an *aide-mémoire* telling the Germans that the British Government was using urgent pressure in Prague to make the Czechs "go to the limit" in seeking a settlement with Henlein (incidentally, by revealing this to the Germans directly disobeying instructions from London). The Germans, naturally, were pleased to hear this—but did not give any intelligible response to his request that they in their turn should exercise pressure on Henlein. Yet the next day Henderson cabled that Hugh Wilson, the American Ambassador—with whom he had obviously discussed the matter—agreed with him in thinking the German reaction "as quite as satisfactory as I anticipated"—and that "all depends now on Beneš".<sup>5</sup> Hugh Wilson had interpreted the American attitude correctly: Cordell Hull, Secretary of State, stated publicly that the U.S.A. should not undertake any action against

<sup>1</sup> Langer and Gleason, *The Challenge to Isolation, 1937-1940* (1952), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950* (1952), pp. 79-80.

<sup>3</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States. Diplomatic Papers. 1938* (referred to further as *F.R.U.S.*), vol. I (1955), p. 486.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted for two of the references which follow, from works not easily available in this country, to an article, *Rol Amerikanskoi Diplomatii v Organizatsii Miunhenskoi Konferentsii 1938 goda*, by Y. V. Arutiunyan, in *Voprosy Istorii*, No. 2, 1958.

<sup>5</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, pp. 282, 290.

Hitler.<sup>6</sup> And when the Czechoslovak Government mobilised, a week later, Ambassador Bullitt cabled from Paris on May 21 and 22 his dissatisfaction that the Czechs and Slovaks preferred to fight rather than to make concessions—and his opinion that the U.S.A. should “attempt to find some way which will let the French out of their moral commitment”—otherwise there would be “the establishment of Bolshevism from one end of the Continent to the other”.<sup>7</sup>

In London Ambassador Kennedy was going further. The German Ambassador Dirksen cabled to Berlin on June 13, after a talk with him the same day, that “he had learned from the most varied sources that the present government had done great things for Germany, and that the Germans were satisfied and enjoyed good living conditions. . . . It was not so much the fact that we wanted to get rid of the Jews that was so harmful to us, but rather the loud clamour with which we accompanied this purpose. He himself understood our Jewish policy completely; he was from Boston, and there, in one golf club and in other clubs, no Jews had been admitted for the past fifty years. . . . Ambassador Kennedy repeatedly expressed his conviction that in economic matters Germany had to have a free hand in the east as well as in the south-east.”<sup>8</sup>

It is not to be wondered at that Beneš wrote in after years of these Ambassadors: “Joseph Kennedy stood expressly and consistently behind Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement. . . . Chamberlain more than once took advantage of Kennedy’s attitude. . . . Hugh Wilson fully believed even in August, 1938, that a peaceful orientation of German policy was not impossible. . . . His naïve belief in the peaceful intentions of the Berlin government amazed me. He told me expressly that Goering did not want a war. . . . William Bullitt did not at first express himself publicly in favour of ‘appeasement’ like J. Kennedy, but he worked for it incessantly. His attitude towards us during the crisis of September, 1938, was wholly negative. . . . Bullitt’s own policy at that time and later was mainly dictated by his dislike—his personal dislike—of the Soviet Union. . . . His actions were directed principally against the Soviets.” Moreover, Beneš saw that a section of official circles in Washington “were essentially entangled in the Munich policy and had a certain responsibility for it”.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Bendiner, *The Riddle of the State Department* (1942), p. 58.

<sup>7</sup> *F.R.U.S.*, vol. I, pp. 509-11. <sup>8</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. I, pp. 714-15, 718.

<sup>9</sup> Beneš, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-3. It was not only the U.S.S.R. that Bullitt objected to: on May 24 he cabled to the State Department that in France the Communists were “affected by Jews of all classes who are unanimously eager for war against Hitler” (*F.R.U.S.*, vol. I, p. 519).

When the Runciman mission was being forced on the Czechs, Hugh Wilson told Henderson on July 22 that he thought a plebiscite in the border territories was “the only possible solution”, and suggested that Neville Chamberlain should state publicly that which way the sympathies of the British people would go depended on Beneš displaying genuine readiness to compromise.<sup>10</sup> In a talk with the Polish Ambassador in Berlin, during the second week in August, Wilson deplored the fact that, unlike the authorities in Prague, “the broad mass of the (Czechoslovak) people underrated the danger” (i.e. the necessity of surrendering the borderlands).<sup>11</sup>

An official account of Ambassador Wilson’s conversation with Beneš on August 6 in fact shows that he stressed to the President that (i) he did not “believe that Hitler contemplated a military attack on Czechoslovakia”, (ii) “there was no ground for the belief that the people of the United States would support any policy of military aid to any country of Europe”, (iii) the Germans on Germany’s side of the border were better off than those in Czechoslovakia. In short, Wilson cautiously did his best to make Beneš feel isolated and in danger of being represented as responsible for war, should it break out, and as an oppressor of the German-speaking population. On August 13 Wilson was pressing for a plebiscite in the border districts, advising the State Department that it “might reduce this particular problem to a local issue rather than to one which threatens the peace of Europe”.<sup>12</sup>

On August 16 and 18, Cordell Hull and Roosevelt made speeches warning the Germans against violence on precisely the lines followed by Chamberlain—that “we cannot when there is trouble elsewhere expect to remain unaffected” and when “armies take the field no one of us can be sure that his country, or even his home, is safe” (Hull): and that “we in the Americas are no longer a far-away continent. . . . The vast amount of our resources, and the vigour of our commerce, and the strength of our men have made us vital factors in world peace, whether we choose or not” (Roosevelt).<sup>13</sup> The German Embassy in Washington reported on September 1 that, while the U.S.A. was not preparing for war, its “leading political circles” would advocate it if Britain and France were involved in a war with Germany.<sup>14</sup> On September 4, unveiling a monument commemorating the arrival of American troops in France in 1917, Bullitt made a speech confirming this in Chamberlain’s favourite words: “If war breaks out in

<sup>10</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, Vol. II, p. 615.

<sup>11</sup> *D. & M.*, vol. I, pp. 146, 149.

<sup>12</sup> *F.R.U.S.*, vol. I, pp. 541-3, 545.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Werth, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

<sup>14</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 680-1.



Europe once again, no man can say or predict whether or not the United States would be involved in such a war."<sup>15</sup>

But two days before, in a private talk with the British Ambassador at Paris, the same Bullitt had expressed warm approval of the Runciman mission, saying that it now had "the last word": and went on to a long disquisition about Russia wishing to provoke "a general conflagration", from which she would "arise like a phoenix, but out of all our ashes, and bring about a world revolution".<sup>16</sup>

These two statements, public and private, have to be taken together to see the two facets of United States policy at the moment when the Czechoslovak Government, under the relentless pressure from all sides, was producing the "Fourth Plan". The threat of United States participation in war was intended, not as a defence of Czechoslovakia against demands which would, if granted, leave her defenceless thereafter, but on the contrary, to impel Germany to go on making these demands without resorting to war—and with the assurance that she would be successful. Ambassador Wilson, in fact, told Weizsäcker on September 1 that "all counsels would prevent the (German) Government from military action . . . when patience would produce so many advantageous results".<sup>17</sup>

As though to underline this point, President Roosevelt himself said at his press conference on September 9 that it was "about 100 per cent. incorrect" to interpret his policy as associating the United States with France and Great Britain in a front against Hitler, that Bullitt's speech did not represent a moral obligation, and that the U.S.A. did not give their support to an anti-Hitler front of the democracies.<sup>18</sup> This was all the more striking because, as Bonnet has pointed out, Bullitt's phrase had been submitted to Washington before he used it. But the apparent contradiction was not a contradiction at all: the two statements represented two sides of the same policy, which had to be taken as a whole.

The anti-Soviet undercurrent of this policy continued from time to time to rise to the surface—as, for example, when the rupture of negotiations by the Henleinites and the concentration of German forces near the Czechoslovak frontier were followed by the renewal on September 8 of the Soviet proposals for a joint note to Germany by Britain, France and the Soviet Union. Commenting on the

<sup>15</sup> Werth, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

<sup>17</sup> F.R.U.S., vol. I, p. 567.

<sup>18</sup> *Survey*, p. 273, gives only the first sentence: the rest, circulated by the agencies, is quoted by Bonnet, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

<sup>16</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. II, p. 219.

situation, the American Ambassador in London on the 10th suggested to Lord Halifax that the Soviet Government "make some move that would compel attention, such as the concentration of planes near her frontier".<sup>19</sup> This, at a time when the only preparations in the West had been certain naval precautions by Great Britain, which could not directly threaten the Germans, and the day after Roosevelt's press statement, would have been a provocation comparable with that attempted, in November the previous year, at the Brussels conference on China. The British Government, conscious that it had only a few days before thrown cold water on a Soviet proposal, made in Moscow and London, for military as well as political co-operation with the Western Powers, did not take up Mr. Kennedy's suggestion.<sup>20</sup> A cable from Bullitt on September 14, in the meantime, shows him and Phipps agreeing that "the trouble maker in the present situation was Beneš"—on the ground that the Czechoslovak Government had reinforced their troops in the border areas after the Henlein rising!<sup>21</sup>

Kennedy's provocation was underlined by the fact that about the 20th (according to Bonnet) the French Government was informed in writing by the United States Government that, in the event of war, the aircraft it had ordered in the U.S.A. in May could not, under the Neutrality Act, be delivered.<sup>22</sup> This, of course, was one way of applying the policy of helping France to free herself from her obligations to Czechoslovakia. It must be added, as a pendant to this, that the United States Minister in Prague (as the archives of the President's Chancery have shown)<sup>23</sup> was among those who urged the Czechoslovak Government on September 20 to accept the Anglo-French terms.

While Chamberlain was in Godesberg, Kennedy on the 23rd "supported all that the 'old man' was doing".<sup>24</sup> When the question of an international conference on Czechoslovakia was already being discussed behind the scenes, Bullitt told the State Department on the 24th (while pressing for Roosevelt to invite Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Poland) that it was "essential not to include the Soviet Russian Government"—and on the 27th he had the satisfaction of hearing by telephone from Sumner Welles that his wish had been fulfilled—that only "the ones you were talking about" had been suggested.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the proposal which Roosevelt made that day for

<sup>19</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. II, p. 278.

<sup>21</sup> F.R.U.S., vol. I, p. 595.

<sup>23</sup> Bernasek, *Bez slavy a bez ilusi*, Prague, 1956, p. 202.

<sup>24</sup> Wrench, *op. cit.*, p. 377.

<sup>20</sup> Churchill, *op. cit.*, pp. 229-32.

<sup>22</sup> Bonnet, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

<sup>25</sup> F.R.U.S., vol. I, pp. 642, 675.

an international conference—though it left open which were “the nations directly interested in the present controversy”—was sent only to Hitler:<sup>26</sup> his appeal the previous day, to continue negotiations, had been sent to Hitler, Bencs, Chamberlain and Daladier. Thus in this respect, too, United States policy fitted perfectly into that of Chamberlain—and Hitler. For on the 24th the German Chargé d’Affaires in Washington had cabled home that the leading authorities of the United States army were showing “understanding” for Germany and “a pronounced antipathy towards Russia”.<sup>27</sup>

When it came to Munich, there were no bones about it. The United States Government was wholeheartedly behind Munich. Roosevelt later told Halifax that he had sent Chamberlain “the shortest telegram I ever sent, two words ‘good man’”.<sup>28</sup> Ambassador Kennedy on the 29th expressed to Lord Halifax his entire approval of, and sympathy with, Chamberlain’s action.<sup>29</sup> After Munich he told people that Britain would one day erect a statue to Chamberlain for saving her.<sup>30</sup>

Whether it is true, as American historians have asserted, that Roosevelt had “persuaded himself that the Munich agreement opened vistas to a new and better order”,<sup>31</sup> must be left to future research to determine. What is incontestable is that the idea of a passive America, playing no active part in the policies that brought about Munich, is a myth.

<sup>26</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, pp. 983-5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 922.

<sup>28</sup> The Earl of Halifax, *Fulness of Days* (1957), p. 195; F.R.U.S., vol. I, p. 688.

<sup>29</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. II, p. 625.

<sup>30</sup> G. Bilainkin, *Maisky* (1944), p. 224.

<sup>31</sup> Langer and Gleason, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

## CHAPTER VIII

### WHERE THE SOVIET UNION STOOD

#### 1. *Helping Victims of Aggression*

WHEN the U.S.S.R. joined the League of Nations in 1934, it did so in the belief that, in Stalin’s words, the League might be a “stumbling block” in the way of war. The Soviet Government had no special illusions about the loyalty of Great Powers in 1934 to ideals to which they had subscribed in 1919. This would have been strange, after the history of the intervening years; and all the more because, at the very time they were subscribing to those ideals, the Great Powers were engaged in an invasion of Russia which set the ideals at defiance. The Soviet Government, however, did believe that, in their own interests, Powers with the most varied social systems might combine to protect their interests against the threat of aggression, and that this would serve the cause of peace generally: which the U.S.S.R. needed for its socialist construction. As the League machinery now provided one means of bringing about such a combination (owing to changes in international alignments since 1919)—one moreover which had the merit of commanding the support of millions of people in many countries—the League was worth while supporting and maintaining.

So much had several times been publicly proclaimed between 1933 and 1938 by Soviet spokesmen.<sup>1</sup> The U.S.S.R. had in addition demonstrated its readiness more than once to join in collective action which could restrain an aggressor, or, if he would not be restrained, crush him.

The Soviet Government had not been a member of the League for twelve months when the Italian aggression against Ethiopia began. It imposed sanctions against Italy in respect of all the commodities decided upon at Geneva, and in the fullest measure, thereby injuring interests of long standing in a profitable trade, for the sake of a League

<sup>1</sup> Stalin’s talk with Walter Duranty on December 25, 1933; Molotov’s speeches at the Central Executive Committee of Soviets, December 28, 1933, and at the 7th All-Union Congress of Soviets, January 28, 1935; Litvinov’s speeches at Geneva on the Soviet entry into the League, September 18, 1934, and on the winding up of sanctions against Italy, July, 1936.



member with which it had neither diplomatic nor any commercial relations. Furthermore, at the critical stage of the conflict, in December, 1935, and January, 1936, particularly, its People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Litvinov made clear to Anthony Eden and other representatives of the British and French Governments that, while the U.S.S.R. had no intention of supporting sanctions merely to secure better terms for Great Britain on the Sudanese frontier or for France in the management of the Addis Ababa-Jibuti railway, it was prepared to join with them in imposing those oil sanctions which would have been fatal for Mussolini, and to stand by them in all the possible consequences.

Shortly after the end of sanctions against Italy, the rebellion of General Franco began in Spain, and the Powers which had prepared and planned it—Germany and Italy—were soon engaged in active intervention, particularly by the supply of aeroplanes. The Soviet Government protested from the first against the so-called “non-intervention” scheme, as a flagrant breach of the principle of collective security embodied in the League Covenant. It joined the Non-Intervention Committee, when there was nothing else for it, in order (as Litvinov said at the League Assembly in September, 1938) to provide a “Soviet brake” on the tendencies, which showed themselves from the outset, to make the Non-Intervention Committee the nucleus of a coalition against the Spanish Republic. From October, 1936, onwards, the attitude of the Soviet Government was that it was henceforth bound by the obligations of “non-intervention” exactly as much as those Powers which had been sending aeroplanes, tanks, munitions and men to Franco during the previous two months. Thereafter, the Soviet Government was as good as its word. It sent tanks, guns, planes, raw materials, and volunteer pilots, technicians and advisers.<sup>2</sup> It pursued this policy although it was almost alone in doing so, under considerable practical difficulties, and in the teeth of undisguised official hostility in Great Britain and France. Furthermore, it supported the Spanish Government in all its appeals at the League of Nations for the restoration of fair play by the abolition of the Non-Intervention Committee, to the great anger of the British and French delegations.

<sup>2</sup> Some account of this assistance can be found in the reminiscences of a Soviet pilot, Boris Smirnov, *Ispanski Veter*, in the Soviet Writers' Union journal, *Novy Mir*, January, 1957. Alvarez del Vayo, the Spanish Republic's Foreign Minister, writes: “In the last week of October Russian war material reached us. On October 29 Russian artillery made their first appearance on our front. On November 11 the first Russian plane appeared in Spanish skies. . . . From October 29 right on until the end of the war we received Russian aid” (*Freedom's Battle*, London, 1940, p. 67).

The Soviet Government not only supported the appeal of the Chinese Government to the League against Japanese aggression (in September, 1937), but loyally carried out the Assembly's decision in favour of helping China. This loyalty had taken the form of first, an agreement to provide a credit of \$100 million, when the non-aggression pact with China was being signed,<sup>3</sup> and then a declaration, at the Brussels conference in November, 1937, that the Soviet Government was prepared to go to the uttermost limit in collective action to defend China and repel the aggressor, and that it supported in their entirety the comparatively moderate demands put forward by the Chinese delegation at the conference—for the granting of a loan to China to buy arms, and for the imposition of an embargo against the aggressor. The Soviet supplies of munitions of war to the Chinese Government<sup>4</sup> played no inconsiderable part in enabling the Chinese to continue their resistance, and to make preparations for a long war of attrition against Japan. The same could not be said of Britain, France and the U.S.A., as was shown earlier.

It is necessary to recall these elementary facts of international life in the years immediately preceding 1938, partly because they explain why the Soviet attitude on the Czechoslovakian question was a natural development of its general policy, and partly because an extraordinary feature of subsequent discussion of the Soviet attitude has been the calm assumption that it was the readiness and ability of the U.S.S.R. to help victims of aggression which was in doubt, not the readiness and ability of the Governments of Great Britain and France.

Furthermore, while anxious for obvious reasons to preserve peace on its borders, the U.S.S.R. never hesitated to strike as hard as it could at the aggressor who overstepped the mark and infringed its vital interests. In the case of the sinking of its ships and the imprisonment and torture of its seamen by Italian submarines and Spanish rebels, the Soviet Government was prevented from direct reprisals by the lack of a modern battle fleet of sufficient dimensions. But where it could act, and particularly on the borders of the Chinese territories

<sup>3</sup> Joseph E. Davies, *Mission to Moscow* (New York, 1941), p. 248. Davies, who was U.S. Ambassador in Moscow at the time, noted in his diary on November 11, 1937, that deliveries from the U.S.S.R. had already “far exceeded that amount”: 400 of the best Soviet bomber and pursuit planes had already been shipped overland to China, accompanied by at least forty Soviet instructors. In 1942 he wrote: “The Soviet Union was helping China during all those years when we were selling oil and scrap metal to Japan” (*ibid.*, p. 545).

<sup>4</sup> *The Times* Peking correspondent (January 28, 1938) confirmed reports “that Soviet arms are reaching China in large quantities. . . . Up to a fairly recent date careful observers had seen at least 600 armoured cars passing through Sinkiang into Kansu, and over 200 aeroplanes . . . mostly of fast fighter types.”



seized by the Japanese, it replied without hesitation to their provocation. In the spring of 1936, it annihilated a well-equipped corps of several thousand Japanese and Manchurian troops who ventured over the Soviet border. In the summer of 1937, when by a sudden attack the Japanese succeeded in sinking a Soviet gunboat on the Amur, a Soviet counter-attack resulted in the capture of a Japanese gunboat and in the inflicting of heavy losses on the Japanese.

Soviet aid to China, after the Japanese war on her began, enraged the Tokyo Government, and on April 4, 1938, its Ambassador formally protested to Litvinov. The latter replied that Soviet-Chinese trade was no concern of Japan's, but that "the sale of arms, including aircraft, to China is entirely in accord with the standard procedure of international law".

Failing to intimidate, the Japanese tried the effect of direct aggression. At the end of July, 1938, a surprise concentration of approximately a division of Japanese troops, heavily reinforced by aircraft, at Lake Hassan, in the extreme Far East, was able for a few days to drive back the small Soviet frontier detachment a distance of three or four miles from the border. But in the course of the subsequent week, in spite of considerable tactical difficulties imposed by the instructions to the Soviet troops that they must not cross the frontier for the sake of taking the Japanese in flank, the Red Army drove the Japanese completely from Soviet territory, and restored its control along the actual line of the whole frontier, as it had been delimited nearly half a century before.

The Soviet Government had not been guided in its foreign policy by ideological sympathies. The principle that the Soviet Government, born as a Socialist babe, so to speak, into a world where capitalism was a going concern, must find ways and means of peacefully coexisting with the capitalist States—or at least with as many of them as were willing to maintain peaceful relations—was laid down by Lenin between 1917 and 1923.<sup>5</sup> He applied it in a number of different ways in his daily policy. It was proclaimed by the Soviet delegate Chicherin at the Genoa Conference in 1922. The U.S.S.R. traded and maintained diplomatic relations with Fascist Italy as with democratic France, with Imperial Japan as with Republican United States. It could not apply any other principle in its foreign relations, or attempt to discriminate between States according to its likes or dislikes of their social and political systems unless, as Lenin once said, it was prepared

<sup>5</sup> Examples of his statements on this subject are given in the writer's *History of the U.S.S.R.* (1950), pp. 74-7, and *Peaceful Coexistence* (1955), pp. 28-35.

"to emigrate to the moon". Furthermore, the task of discrimination, were it ever attempted, would have imposed impossible difficulties. Thus, for example, the British Empire, when viewed at its London end, might seem the seat of a considerable measure of democracy, and in any case of a popularly limited and constitutional monarchy. Viewed, on the other hand, from the colonial end in 1938—say, from Bombay or Cairo, with the peoples of whom the Soviet Union had unmistakable ideological sympathy—the British Empire might seem a very different institution. Discrimination would consequently be difficult.

Even in the case of the victims of aggression for whom the Soviet Union displayed its practical support after its entry into the League (it had helped countries struggling against colonialism, like Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan, long before) there could be no question of ideological sympathy as a determining factor. True, in the case of Spain—while the Republican Government of 1936 was very far from "red"—there was at any rate a popular movement in defence of the bourgeois type of democracy against the attacks of the Fascist generals, which commanded the affection of the U.S.S.R. as it did that of all progressive people throughout the world. But in the case of China, the Government to which the U.S.S.R. granted aid was a long way removed from even bourgeois democracy, had very strong elements of feudalism still grouped around it, and in any case, for a number of years, had been engaged in the most pitiless repression of all popular movements in its territory. As for Ethiopia, here it was the case of a monarchy in the very first stage of attempted emergence from a feudalism of the kind that prevailed in England under, say, King Stephen 800 years before.

In supporting these victims of Fascist aggression, and in pressing for a combination of forces to make resistance more effective, the Soviet Government was not therefore—as was asserted for many months, on inspiration which can be traced directly back to the German Propaganda Ministry—seeking to establish an "ideological bloc". Common ideology between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the British Empire, the democratic Republic of Czechoslovakia, the semi-Fascist régime of Lithuania—to take only four examples—would be very hard to discover. Yet all four of them might be interested in mutual protection against an aggressor. That was precisely the principle on which the Covenant of the League of Nations was built. The bloc for resisting an aggressor which the Soviet Union sought was none other than the bloc provided under the preamble and the various clauses



of the League Covenant, drawn up without consulting the U.S.S.R., and long years before it was invited to join the League of Nations.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of Czechoslovakia, the U.S.S.R. was bound to the potential victim of aggression by closer ties than with either China or Spain. With neither of these countries had it any special treaty relations for mutual defence; in the case of Spain, even normal diplomatic relations did not exist when the rebellion broke out. In the case of Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union had signed a pact of mutual assistance, on May 16, 1935, which provided in its essentials (i) that should either country "be threatened with or in danger of an attack on the part of any European State whatsoever", the two signatories would consult immediately with a view to measures provided under article 10 of the League Covenant (preservation of the territorial integrity and existing political independence of League members against external aggression), (ii) that should either country "be the object of an unprovoked attack on the part of any European State whatsoever", and the League Council fail to reach a unanimous report, the two States would immediately render one another assistance and support.

A protocol, signed at the same time, restricted the application of the treaty to occasions on which "aid will be accorded by France to the party which is the victim of aggression".<sup>7</sup>

This reservation, it must be pointed out, was not demanded by the Soviet Government, but by Czechoslovakia. The latter in 1935 and subsequently feared, as was shown earlier, that Poland might one day be involved in war with the U.S.S.R., while still nominally an ally of France, just as Czechoslovakia was.<sup>8</sup> The Czechoslovak Government did not wish in such circumstances to be obliged to attack a fellow-ally of France. The Soviet Government would have preferred the pact to be applicable to all circumstances, but the Czechoslovak Government gained its point.<sup>9</sup> It is not true, therefore, that the Soviet Government made this reservation because it foresaw a convenient opportunity arising to evade its obligations. In point of fact, as will be seen later, the Soviet Government was prepared not to allow even

<sup>6</sup> Litvinov's speech at the 17th League Assembly, September 28, 1936 (*Against Aggression*, p. 50).

<sup>7</sup> The protocol also provided that both States would act in concert to ensure that the League Council issued its recommendations "with all the speed required", and that if it failed to do so, "for whatever reason", the obligation to render assistance would nevertheless be put into effect. This has been often overlooked.

<sup>8</sup> This was one of the main eventualities discussed between Germany and the Western Powers as far back as the Locarno meetings in October, 1925 (Dirksen's notes of the discussions printed in *Istoricheski Arhiv*, Moscow, 1956, Nos. 4 and 5).

<sup>9</sup> Litvinov's speech at the League Assembly (Sixth Committee), September 23, 1938 (see above, p. 156).

this important reservation to stand in the way of aiding Czechoslovakia. The point is, however, that this could not really surprise any Government, since—as has already been shown—the U.S.S.R. had shown that it would do as much for countries with whom it had no such relations.

The concealment from world public opinion, both before and after Munich, of the full facts about the Soviet Union's readiness to assist Czechoslovakia, was one of the least attractive features of the policy of co-operation with Hitler against the U.S.S.R. which, after Munich, was disguised under the title of "appeasement".

The Czechoslovak question first became acute as we know after the seizure of Austria by Germany on March 11-12, 1938. A few days later, on March 15, a high official in Moscow, than whom "no one could speak with greater authority" (*Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* Moscow correspondent, March 17), received a number of foreign journalists whom he told that the Soviet Union would fulfil all its pledges to Czechoslovakia, on condition that France did the same. This could be accepted, he said, as the expression of a decision "finally and irrevocably reached". When Litvinov (for it was he) was reminded that the U.S.S.R. had no common frontier with Czechoslovakia, being separated from her by Rumanian or Polish territory, he replied in English: "Where there's a will, there's a way."

In reality, it was well known that the attitude of Rumania and even of Poland, formally dependent upon their membership of the League (article 16, paragraph 3, of the Covenant stated that League members "will take the necessary steps to afford passage through their territory to the forces of any of the members of the League which are co-operating to protect the Covenant of the League"), would in fact depend on the attitude taken up by France, at any rate in the first instance. If France really intended to carry out her obligations, therefore, she would naturally arrange with the countries concerned to get the matter of passage for Soviet troops raised at the League at the proper time—and make all the necessary preliminary arrangements privately with the U.S.S.R.

In fact, there was at least one Western Ambassador who reported home that "the implication generally accepted here was that the U.S.S.R. was serving notice on Poland in particular, and possibly on Rumania as well, that if necessary the Soviets would violate territorial boundaries to go to the aid of Czechoslovakia".<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Report to the State Department, Washington, by Joseph E. Davies, March 26, 1938 (*op. cit.*, pp. 292-3).



## 2. The Soviet Offers

On March 17, the Soviet Ambassadors in London, Paris and Washington, and the Soviet Minister in Prague, presented to the Governments to which they were accredited a statement (given to the press in Moscow as well) drawing attention to the serious threat to peace created by the annexation of Austria, and in the first place to the menace to Czechoslovakia.<sup>11</sup> The note proceeded:

"The present international situation puts before the peace-loving countries, and in particular before the big Powers, the question of their responsibility for the future fate of the peoples of Europe and elsewhere. The Soviet Government being conscious of the obligations devolving upon it from the Covenant of the League, the Briand-Kellogg Pact and from its treaties of mutual assistance concluded with France and Czechoslovakia, I am in a position to state on its behalf that the Soviet Government is on its part as heretofore prepared to participate in collective actions the scope of which should be decided in conjunction with the Soviet Government, and which should have as their aim the stopping of the further development of aggression and the elimination of the increased danger of a new world slaughter.

"The Soviet Government is prepared to commence immediately, together with other States in the League of Nations or outside of it, the consideration of practical measures called for by the present circumstances. To-morrow it may be too late, but to-day the time has not yet passed, if all the States and especially the great Powers will adopt a firm and unequivocal stand in regard to the problems of the collective saving of peace."

The purpose of this statement was to find out straight away what the other great Powers on whom, in the long run, the fate of Czechoslovakia depended were prepared to do. There was no doubt about the value of the procedure suggested—if they were prepared to do anything. As a British statesman with wide experience of foreign affairs wrote: "If instead of snubbing the Russian Government by curtly saying that their proposal was inopportune, we had welcomed it and had summoned a meeting of the League Assembly, we could then have announced that the British, French and Russian Governments regarded as of vital importance the maintenance of the principle that no country must resort to war in breach of the Covenant, and were ready to take all measures necessary to enforce it. I do not believe

<sup>11</sup> The text (differing slightly from that used here) is printed in Litvinov's *Against Aggression* (1939), pp. 114-16; and in *D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, pp. 62-4.

that any member of the League of any importance would have opposed such a movement. But if they did so, that would not technically have made any difference. . . . In practice the only important thing was to know whether we should have been supported by sufficient strength to make it impossible for Germany to have persisted in her policy."<sup>12</sup>

That no doubt is the very reason why the Soviet proposal was rejected, in the terms quoted earlier. As Ambassador Davies commented, in his dispatch to Mr. Sumner Welles on March 26, two days after Chamberlain's speech in Parliament announcing the rejection: "For some reason, or lack of reason, there seems to be no purpose on the part of the democracies of Europe to fortify their position realistically by availing themselves of such strength as there is here, as part of their common front in working out a *modus vivendi vis-à-vis* Mussolini and Hitler. England and France seemed to be doing exactly the opposite here, and have been playing into the hands of the Nazi and the Fascist aims."<sup>13</sup> In reality, Mr. Davies was (as we have seen) underestimating the perfect understanding of, and sympathy with, the aims of Britain and France which existed in his own State Department.

However, the Soviet Union continued publicly and privately to make its position known.

A few days after the statement of March 17, 1938, the Soviet Ambassador in France informed the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Paul-Boncour, that the U.S.S.R. was ready to render Czechoslovakia the aid provided by the Soviet-Czechoslovak treaty, if required.<sup>14</sup>

On April 23, 1938, Fierlinger, Czechoslovak Minister in Moscow, reported to Prague: "The Soviet Union, if required, is ready in agreement with France and Czechoslovakia to take all steps for the security of Czechoslovakia."<sup>15</sup> By this time, as pointed out earlier, the French Ambassador had had from the Minister practical evidence of this readiness.

On April 26, President Kalinin in a review of the international situation at a meeting of agitators and propagandists in Moscow recalled the obligations of the Soviet treaty with Czechoslovakia and their dependence on France fulfilling hers, adding: "Of course, the pact does not prohibit either side coming to the aid of the other

<sup>12</sup> Viscount Cecil, *op. cit.*, pp. 311-12.

<sup>13</sup> Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

<sup>14</sup> A. Y. Popov, *S.Sh.A.—Organizator i Aktivny Uchastnik Mюнхенского Сговора* (1952), p. 27; and *D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, p. 197.

<sup>15</sup> I. Doležal, *Otnoshenie Sovetskogo Soyuza k Чехословакии в период Мюнхена* (1951), pp. 86-7; quoted in *Voprosy Istorii*, *loc. cit.*, p. 80.



without waiting for France." This speech was republished as a pamphlet.<sup>16</sup>

On May 8, 1938, President Kalinin received foreign workers' delegations which were in Moscow for the May Day celebrations. In reply to a question by a Czechoslovak trade unionist, Kalinin said: "The Soviet Union has always and without reserve honoured the treaties concluded with other nations; she would do the same in this case, too, and if necessary would fulfil all her obligations towards Czechoslovakia and France to the last letter. . . . The Soviet Union has minerals, iron, oil, foodstuffs, cotton and in fact everything necessary for conducting a war. And France does not possess all this in the same measure. If the treaty of friendship between the Soviet Union, France and Czechoslovakia were as strong as we wish it to be, it would influence Britain also to choose other directions for her policy than those so far pursued, and the treaty would have greater international significance and weight." The interview was published in *Moscow News*, mentioned in messages from Moscow by several correspondents and given great prominence in the Czechoslovak press, as Newton reported from Prague.<sup>17</sup>

On May 12, 1938, at Geneva, Litvinov told Bonnet (in an informal conversation) that the Soviet Union would fulfil her obligations to Czechoslovakia, if France did the same, and proposed talks between the Soviet and French general staffs on the technical requirements—including the question of transit for Soviet troops through Rumania and Poland.<sup>18</sup> Bonnet promised to report the proposal: but nothing more was heard of it—we have seen why, in Coulondre's account of his talks with Bonnet and Daladier (Chapter VI)—and on the contrary, false reports were "leaked" into the French press. It was because of this—as the writer has the best of reasons to know—that Robert Dell, the *Manchester Guardian* correspondent at the League, was made aware of the facts, and published them.

In the middle of May, Stalin asked Gottwald, the leader of the Czechoslovak Communists, to come and see him. "In a prolonged conversation we discussed the position of Czechoslovakia, and the question of Soviet aid in the event of an attack on her by Hitlerite Germany. Then Stalin told me plainly that the Soviet Union was ready to give military aid to Czechoslovakia even if France did not do so (which was the condition for Soviet aid), and even in the event

<sup>16</sup> M. I. Kalinin, *O mezhdunarodnom položenii*, Moscow, 1938, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, pp. 268-9, and D.B.F.P., vol. I, pp. 288-9. Kalinin's assurances are also mentioned by Gedye, *op. cit.*, p. 399, and Wheeler-Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, May 18, 1938.

of Beck's Poland or Boyar Rumania, as they were then, refusing passage to Soviet troops.<sup>19</sup> Of course, Stalin underlined, the Soviet Union can come to the assistance of Czechoslovakia on one condition—if Czechoslovakia herself resists and asks for Soviet aid. I asked comrade Stalin whether I could transmit this promise to responsible persons in the Czechoslovak Republic. In reply to this, Stalin directly commissioned me to transmit the content of the conversation to the then President Beneš. And this I did."<sup>20</sup>

Beneš never revealed this offer, e.g. in his *Diary*—although he more than once admitted in general terms that the U.S.S.R. had offered to come to Czechoslovakia's aid even if France were disloyal to her obligations.

On May 25, 1938, A. A. Troyanovsky, the Soviet Ambassador in Washington, repeated, in a public speech, that "our people, in a military sense and psychologically, are prepared to repulse any foreign invasion, and the aggressors probably would prepare to take many preliminary steps before attacking the Soviet Union. . . . But, though our country does not appear to be menaced by immediate danger, we cannot wash our hands of the present European situation. We have our principles and we are tied by our treaties. We will be faithful to those principles and those treaties. We are ready with France to defend Czechoslovakia in the event of an aggression. . . . The attitude of the Czechs is an encouraging factor, which shows the way to deal with those aggressors."<sup>21</sup>

During the next few days the Soviet newspaper *Izvestia* (May 26), *Krasnaya Zvezda* (May 30), *Pravda* (June 3), and others published articles in the same sense. The last sentence quoted from Troyanovsky's remarks referred to the Czechoslovak mobilisation of five days before. The Soviet Legation in Prague was the only mission of a Great Power at the end of the month which was not urging the Government there to demobilise.

On May 30, 1938, the British military attaché in Moscow reported that his Czechoslovak colleague had told him of officers from his country's army already attached to certain Red Army units, and of

<sup>19</sup> Col. Beck, withdrawn from his diplomatic post in Paris in 1923 because the French Government had reason to consider him a spy, was now Foreign Minister of Poland. The "boyars" were the great feudal landowners of Rumania.

<sup>20</sup> K. Gottwald's article in *Pravda*, December 21, 1949 (the date is made precise in the collection of his articles published in Prague, vol. 8, 1953, p. 289; I am indebted for this fact, not mentioned in the article, to Y. V. Arutiunyan, *loc. cit.*).

<sup>21</sup> This statement, circulated by the B.U.P. and other news agencies throughout the world, is printed in the Royal Institute of International Affairs' *Documents for 1938*, vol. I, p. 315.

reinforcements sent to the Kiev and possibly the Belorussian commands (i.e. to the Soviet Western borders).<sup>22</sup>

These declarations were taken quite seriously by at any rate Rumania, no doubt in consequence of further explanations which were given privately. At the end of May, a delegation of the Rumanian general staff was sent to Warsaw, and on this occasion a *Reuter* message from Bucharest stated: "Moscow has repeatedly asked Rumania to allow Soviet warplanes to pass over Rumanian territory in case Czechoslovakia should be seriously menaced by Germany" (May 30). But at that very time Coulondre was informed by Litvinov that a staff agreement was being negotiated (between the two countries, Coulondre says, but then goes on to make it quite obvious that it was the Polish Government which was pressing the Rumanians to sign one) to oppose the passage of Soviet troops, which the French Ambassador calls "betrayal" by Poland. Litvinov asked him: "What would France, ally of Poland, do in the event of the latter, having attacked Czechoslovakia, being attacked herself by the U.S.S.R.?" The Ambassador, a partisan of Franco-Soviet staff talks as we have seen, could not even imagine such a situation as an attack by one of France's allies upon another. But he was very worried by Bonnet's reply to the Soviet Chargé d'Affaires in Paris, who put the same question a week later—that "the question would be studied". And when he informed Litvinov of the opinion expressed by the legal department of the French Foreign Ministry—that Soviet obligations to Czechoslovakia only began when France intervened—the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs replied: "Quite so, but there is another hypothesis—that in which for one reason or another, the U.S.S.R. intervened without France having budged."<sup>23</sup>

Thus it is quite clear that at the end of May the Soviet Government was following up in practice Stalin's assurance to Gottwald, that it might go to the help of Czechoslovakia in spite of the defection or betrayal of the latter's supposed allies—and was making the preliminary soundings accordingly.<sup>24</sup>

On June 23, 1938, Litvinov made an election speech in Leningrad which was reported in all the Soviet newspapers. In it, after an analysis of world events in recent years, of the encouragement given by the Western Powers to German aggression and of the latest threat to

<sup>22</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, pp. 420 *et seqq.*

<sup>23</sup> Coulondre, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-3.

<sup>24</sup> On May 23, according to the German Legation at Bucharest some weeks later, the Soviet Minister there had suggested to the Rumanian Government that they should discuss "those measures which must be taken by the U.S.S.R. to fulfil its treaty obligations" (D.G.F.P., vol. II, p. 428).

Czechoslovakia, he underlined that "apart from rendering assistance in the event of war", the pacts with France and Czechoslovakia were also aimed at averting or diminishing the very danger of war. The pact with Czechoslovakia was at the moment "the chief, if not the sole, major factor in relieving the tension around Czechoslovakia". But the Soviet Government was not using its promise to assist the victim of aggression "as a means of bringing pressure to bear on this victim, in order to urge it to capitulate to the aggressor and act in such a way that any assistance would be superfluous". If Czechoslovakia were attacked, she would be "the country defending herself"—and the responsibility for the consequences would be borne by the attacking side.<sup>25</sup>

A direct warning was given to Germany by Litvinov in his interview with the German Ambassador, von der Schulenburg, on August 22, 1938, which the latter had sought, as instructed by Ribbentrop, to say that "Germany would only invade Czechoslovakia in the event of an act of provocation on the part of the Czechs". Instead of sympathising with him as the British Ambassador in Berlin was incessantly doing, Litvinov replied that "an act of provocation on the part of the Czechs was unthinkable, and that the Germans would certainly be the aggressor in any conflict which might arise".<sup>26</sup> "You desire the destruction of Czechoslovakia, you want to conquer the country. Naturally you prefer to attain your goal by peaceful means. War is always a risk. Everyone will try to avoid war if he can gain his ends without it." The Soviet Union "had promised Czechoslovakia her support; she would keep her word and do her best". Schulenburg asked how this would be managed, but naturally Litvinov did not tell him!<sup>27</sup>

Litvinov informed the British and French Embassies and Czechoslovak Legation of this interview. Nor did it remain a secret for the world's press. Litvinov's reply to Schulenburg was very definite (said the Prague correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* on August 27, 1938), "and left no room for doubt as to the consequences of any such action on Germany's part. Any military move against the Czechoslovak Republic, the Ambassador was informed, would bring into force at once the guarantees given by the Soviet. The treaty, the German Ambassador was told, would be fulfilled by the Soviet immediately and to the letter."

The German Foreign Office, apparently taken aback by the nature

<sup>25</sup> *Moscow News*, July 5, 1938.

<sup>26</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. II, pp. 140-1

<sup>27</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, pp. 604, 630.



of the Soviet reply and by the publicity given to it, attempted to deny that any official approach had been made in Moscow. It was forced, however, to admit that "German diplomatic representatives abroad have naturally discussed the Czechoslovak question with the governments to which they are accredited".

A broad and quite public hint had already been conveyed at the highest Soviet level, two days before—for those who wanted to listen—that what had been said in May still held good. On August 20, reporting to the Soviet of Nationalities (one of the two chambers of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R.), Professor Otto Schmidt (the eminent scientist and Arctic explorer) recalled that article 49, clause *k*, of the Soviet Constitution provided that the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, between sessions of the latter, declares a state of war "in the event of the necessity arising for carrying out international treaty obligations concerning mutual defence against aggression". The Soviet Union carried out and would carry out its obligations, declared Professor Schmidt amidst great applause. "An international treaty signed and ratified by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R. is not a scrap of paper. . . . The treaties we sign are inviolable. . . . Our mighty Red Army, beloved of all the people, will be able to impose respect for treaties ratified by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet" (*Pravda*, August 21).

On September 2, Litvinov was formally asked by M. Payart, the French Chargé d'Affaires in Moscow, for the first time, what would be the Soviet attitude in the event of an attack on Czechoslovakia. "I gave in the name of my Government the following perfectly clear and unambiguous reply.

"We intend to fulfil our obligations under the Pact and, together with France, to afford assistance to Czechoslovakia by the ways open to us. Our War Department is ready immediately to participate in a conference with representatives of the French and Czechoslovak War Departments, in order to discuss the measures appropriate to the moment. Independently of this, we should consider desirable that the question be raised at the League of Nations, if only as yet under Article II, with the object, first, of mobilising public opinion and, secondly, of ascertaining the position of certain other States, whose passive aid might be extremely valuable. It was necessary, however, to exhaust all means of averting an armed conflict, and we considered one such method to be an immediate consultation between the Great Powers of Europe and other interested States, in order if possible to decide on the terms of a collective *démarche*."

In the speech at the League of Nations Assembly in which he reported this reply, Litvinov prefaced it by the remark that the Soviet Union had abstained from any intervention in the negotiations of the Czechoslovak Government with the Henleinites, considering them to be an internal Czechoslovak affair. "We valued very highly the tact of the Czechoslovak Government, which did not even enquire of us whether we should fulfil our obligations under the pact, since obviously it had no doubt of this, *and had no grounds for doubt*."<sup>28</sup>

Thus the U.S.S.R. (i) renewed its pledge of assistance, on the understanding that France did the same, (ii) renewed its frequent proposals for military staff conversations, (iii) renewed its proposal of March 17 for a consultation of interested Powers, with a view to exercising moral restraint on Germany, (iv) proposed that at the forthcoming meetings of the League (the Council on September 9 and the Assembly on September 12) the question should be raised as one which was "a matter of concern to the whole League", of a "war or threat of war", or of a circumstance "affecting international relations which threaten to disturb international peace", as provided under article II of the League Covenant, (v) pointed out that this would give the opportunity of securing the passive aid of other States—among whom, no doubt, first place would be taken by those whose membership of the League imposed on them the duty of allowing the passage of League troops, such as Rumania and Poland, Belgium and Holland.

The full terms of this clear, unambiguous and precise proposal—recapitulating those which had been made during the preceding five months—were communicated on the same day by Maisky, Soviet Ambassador in London, to Winston Churchill: obviously (Churchill thought) because a direct offer to the Foreign Office "might have encountered a rebuff". Maisky added a detail, which it would not be convenient for Litvinov to mention in public: that the best way to overcome the reluctance of Rumania in regard to the passage of Soviet troops and air forces was through the agency of the League, since a majority decision on the League Council would be sufficient for Rumania to associate herself with the proposed action.<sup>29</sup> It will be remembered that such a majority decision would be one of the ways of setting the Soviet-Czechoslovak pact in motion, in the event of an attack.

Churchill communicated this information to Lord Halifax on

<sup>28</sup> *Verbatim Record of the Nineteenth Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the League of Nations*, 7th Plenary Meeting, September 21, 1938, pp. 12-13.

<sup>29</sup> Churchill, *op. cit.*, pp. 229-30, 232.

September 3. That day the Foreign Secretary had a message from the British Minister in Prague, indicating that the statement made to Payart had been repeated to the Czechoslovak Minister in Moscow.<sup>30</sup>

But Maisky's anticipations were justified. Just as in Paris, Litvinov's offer met in London with a rebuff. Halifax replied to Churchill on September 5 that the action would not at present be "helpful".

On September 8 Maisky raised the matter again with Halifax, who "noted" his remarks.<sup>31</sup> Of course, as we know, Halifax that very day "did not seem in any way to dissent" from Geoffrey Dawson, the editor of *The Times*, who at luncheon with the Foreign Secretary was defending his notorious leading article of September 7, advocating the dismemberment, not the defence, of Czechoslovakia!

These communications did not prevent several newspapers during the first week of September from repeatedly asserting, *without any official contradiction*, that nothing was known of Soviet intentions. But the *Manchester Guardian* diplomatic correspondent learned on September 9 that "it is believed both here and in Paris that Russia would go to war almost automatically as soon as Czechoslovakia was attacked".

On September 11 Bonnet paid a flying visit to Geneva, and saw Litvinov. The latter repeated that the U.S.S.R. would fight if France did, and asked for the French Government's reply to the offer of staff talks on September 2. He again pressed Bonnet to agree to the League Council discussing the danger of war under article 11, so as to ensure that Rumania had general approval if she allowed Soviet troops to pass.<sup>32</sup>

Bonnet replied with vague generalities, promising to look into the matter, and the next day seems not "to have given quite that picture" to the French Cabinet (as Werth puts it). In fact, he gave an entirely false picture of Litvinov having sheltered behind the League in order to avoid committing the U.S.S.R.: the latter, he said, "wanted war to break out between the Western Powers and Germany but would take care to keep out". He did not say one word of Litvinov's real proposals.<sup>33</sup>

On September 12 or 13 Gamelin asked the Soviet military attaché in Paris to inform Voroshilov (then Defence Minister of the U.S.S.R.) of the discussion which he had had with Daladier of plans for a direct attack on Germany. The attaché replied that there were chances that

<sup>30</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. II, p. 229.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273.

<sup>32</sup> Dell, *op. cit.*, p. 272, gives what the writer knows to have been the points made by Litvinov: since he was present when Dell received precise information.

<sup>33</sup> Pertinax, *Les Fossoyeurs*, vol. II, p. 106.

Poland would join the Germans in attacking Czechoslovakia, in which case "the problem for Russia would be to settle Poland rapidly".<sup>34</sup>

This statement is too reminiscent of Stalin's assurance to Gottwald of mid-May, and of Litvinov's talks with Coulondre at the end of May and the beginning of June, not to be authentic. Once again the French Government, like that of Czechoslovakia, had the assurance that if they resisted Hitler's attack, no obstruction by Hitler's jackal Beck would be allowed to stand in the way.

Chamberlain's flight to Berchtesgaden on the 15th produced a close and destructive analysis of his purposes—and a forecast corresponding uncannily with what happened—in *Pravda* of September 17. Almost at the beginning of the article, the central organ of the Soviet Communist Party said: "There can be no doubt that, if Mr. Chamberlain wished to declare in the name of his Government that Great Britain, together with other peace-loving countries, would not permit the violation of the independence and integrity of the Czechoslovak Republic, there would be no need for the 'dramatic gesture' to which the British Prime Minister has had recourse. . . . The days of May showed that only a lasting front of the peace-loving Powers can halt the aggressor."<sup>35</sup> *Pravda* thus made it quite plain to the world that the underlying principle of the Soviet Union's proposals since March 17 still held good.

The first official approach by the Czechoslovak Government to the Soviet Government came on September 19, when for the first time (in Litvinov's words at the League Assembly on September 21) it addressed "a formal enquiry to my Government as to whether the Soviet Union is prepared, in accordance with the Soviet-Czech Pact, to render Czechoslovakia immediate and effective aid if France, loyal to her obligations, will render similar assistance; to which my Government gave a clear answer in the affirmative". This was all the world knew (though it was adequate) for ten years. In 1948 the Soviet Government published the questions which Beneš had asked, and the answers which Litvinov sent to Alexandrovsky, the Soviet Minister in Czechoslovakia, on September 20, 1938, for communication to President Beneš:

"To Beneš' question, whether the U.S.S.R. will, in accordance with the treaty, render immediate and effective aid to Czechoslovakia if France remains loyal to it and also renders aid, you may in the name of the Government of the Soviet Union give an affirmative answer.

<sup>34</sup> Gamelin, *Servir*, vol. II, p. 348.

<sup>35</sup> Text of the article reproduced in English by M. Beloff, *The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia*, vol. II (1949), pp. 148-50.



"You may also give an affirmative answer to Beneš' second question: Will the U.S.S.R. assist Czechoslovakia, as a member of the League of Nations, in accordance with Articles 16 and 17, if, in the event of attack by Germany, Beneš requests the Council of the League to apply the above-mentioned articles?"

"Inform Beneš that we are simultaneously advising the French Government of our answer to his two questions."<sup>36</sup>

It will be noticed that the answer to the second question made no mention of France. Soviet help—as had been indicated previously—was available even if Czechoslovakia's other ally let her down. Mr. Gedye has described, on the strength of information from "a friend of Dr. Beneš", an interview between Beneš and Alexandrovsky on September 18, in which the latter is supposed to have invited Beneš to put a third question, "regarding Russia's action should an appeal to the League be made impossible by some trickery or other". Beneš, according to this account, remained silent.<sup>37</sup> This may or may not be true: but (as the reader knows) Beneš was in possession, at that moment, of Stalin's personal assurance, ever since the middle of May, that the Soviet Union was prepared to come to the help of Czechoslovakia *under all circumstances*—if she resisted Germany. *And Gottwald at this time reminded Beneš of the promise*:<sup>38</sup> while Alexandrovsky in fact did inform the Czechoslovak Government that, should it ask for Soviet support, the U.S.S.R. would give it independently of France.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, so far as Czechoslovakia and France were concerned, the readiness of the Soviet Union to fight for the first-named if need be—with or without the assistance of the French, and in spite of all obstacles—was once again reaffirmed.

But the Soviet Government went further. On the morning of September 21—within a few hours of the scene in Prague Castle, when the British and French Ministers presented their ultimatum to Beneš—it published for the world to know, its proposals to France of September 2, for practical preparations to help Czechoslovakia, and its reaffirmation of support given to the Czechoslovak Government two days previously. The publication was made in the form of Litvinov's

<sup>36</sup> D. & M., vol. I, pp. 203-4. Under article 17, Germany would be called before the League Council, as a non-member, for discussion of her action (the Council instituting an enquiry *without waiting for a reply*): and if she refused and went on with the attack, the sanctions—economic, financial and military—provided under article 16 would be applicable against her.

<sup>37</sup> Gedye, *Fallen Bastions*, pp. 425-6.

<sup>38</sup> K. Gottwald's collected articles, vol. 8, p. 293: quoted by Y. V. Arutiunyan, *loc. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>39</sup> I. Doležal, *op. cit.*, p. 89: quoted by Y. V. Arutiunyan, *loc. cit.*, p. 90.

speech already quoted, which stated the facts (as the historian of the League has said) "with complete clarity".<sup>40</sup>

### 3. September 23

September 23 was a day full of energetic assertion by the Soviet Government of its fundamental attitude. At 4 a.m. in the morning it had undertaken unilateral action to restrain Poland from an attack on Czechoslovakia. Ever since Mr. Chamberlain's visit to Hitler at Berchtesgaden, the Polish Government had been more and more threatening in its attitude towards Czechoslovakia, and had concentrated large forces on the frontier to support its demand for the cession of districts inhabited by Polish-speaking minorities—arousing protests even from the British Government.<sup>41</sup> Poland's ally, France—so active in utilising its alliance with Czechoslovakia for pressure on the latter to commit suicide—took only the most formal of diplomatic action to dissuade Poland, and its representative in Warsaw was treated with barely-concealed ridicule for his pains. On the morning referred to, however, the Polish Chargé d'Affaires in Moscow was informed by the Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, V. P. Potemkin, that the entry of Polish troops into Czechoslovakia would be an act of unprovoked aggression, and would automatically cancel the Polish-Soviet Treaty of Non-Aggression of July 25, 1932.<sup>42</sup> This, of course, was on the surface only a threat to a document. But in spite of the gentle character of the warning, its meaning was well understood: and in spite also of violent language in the Polish press, supported generously from Berlin, not a single Polish soldier ventured openly to cross the frontier until after Munich.

The second important event of September 23 came at the end of the afternoon, in Geneva, at the public session of the Sixth Committee (political questions) of the League Assembly. On top of the excitement caused by the mass upheaval in Prague, the previous day, which had forced a change of government in favour of one pledged—so it seemed—to resistance, the news of the Soviet warning to the Poles had begun privately to circulate through the "diplomatic channels". Although the subject under discussion at the Committee was that of the "reform" (in reality, emasculating) of the Covenant, and Litvinov was due to speak, it was not the certainty of hearing some bitter home

<sup>40</sup> F. P. Walters, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 783.

<sup>41</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. II, p. 459.

<sup>42</sup> The second clause of this treaty provided: "In the event of one of the Contracting Parties committing an aggression against a third State, the other Party should be entitled to denounce the present Treaty without giving any notice" (text in Litvinov's *Against Aggression*, 1939, pp. 156-9).

truths from him on that subject that made the session as crowded as those of a full Assembly. All were certain that some important statement would be made on the central international issue which was being decided so far from Geneva. They were not disappointed. After making mincemeat of the arguments for making sanctions under article 16 voluntary—opening the door wide “for every kind of secret negotiations between the aggressors and League members”, and thereby for terrorisation of smaller States by “international highway-men”—Litvinov said he would “venture on a digression which nevertheless had some bearing on the subject”. Referring to the various reservations inserted in the Soviet-Czechoslovak treaty on the insistence of the Czechoslovak Government itself, he went on:

“The Soviet Government had no obligations to Czechoslovakia in the event of French indifference to an attack on her. In that event the Soviet Government might come to the aid of Czechoslovakia *only in virtue of a voluntary decision on its part*” (my italics. A.R.) “or in virtue of a decision by the League of Nations. But no one could insist on that help as a duty, and in fact the Czechoslovak Government—not only out of formal, but also out of practical considerations—had not raised the question of Soviet assistance independently of assistance by France. Czechoslovakia, after she had already accepted the German-British-French ultimatum, had asked the Soviet Government what would its attitude be; in other words, would it still consider itself bound by the Soviet-Czechoslovak Pact if Germany presented new demands, if the Anglo-German negotiations were unsuccessful and Czechoslovakia decided to defend her frontiers with arms?”

“That second enquiry was quite comprehensible since, after Czechoslovakia had accepted an ultimatum which included the eventual denunciation of the Soviet-Czechoslovak Pact, the Soviet Government had undoubtedly also had the moral right to renounce that Pact. Nevertheless, the Soviet Government, which, for its part, did not seek pretexts for evading the fulfilment of its obligations, had replied to Prague that in the event of France granting assistance under the conditions mentioned in the Czechoslovak enquiry, the Soviet-Czechoslovak Pact would again enter into force.”

By this declaration the Soviet Government deprived the friends of Hitler in the Western countries, should he throw them over and attack Czechoslovakia in spite of everything, of the excuse that they could not come to her defence because Soviet help was now missing. But it was now public, still more definitely than before, that the

Soviet Union might come to Czechoslovakia's aid—in spite of French defection—“in virtue of a voluntary decision on its part”. That possibility was, as Beneš and his government well knew for four months already, a *certainty*—if they wanted it. But now the general public would know at least that such a thing was possible.

The third event of the day followed immediately, at the end of the meeting, when Mr. R. A. Butler, M.P., the British delegate, very publicly went over to M. M. Litvinov and engaged him in earnest conversation for a few minutes. The floodgates of speculation were at once burst open—although it was some time before it became generally known that, later in the evening, Litvinov had been interviewed by Lord de la Warr (Lord Privy Seal and leader of the British delegation to the Assembly) accompanied by Butler.

The British representatives asked him what the Soviet attitude would be if Chamberlain's talks at Godesberg broke down, and Hitler attacked. Litvinov repeated what he had said at the Committee: the Soviet Union would act if the French came to the aid of Czechoslovakia, it might raise the matter at the League, but “the Pact would come into force”. He welcomed this approach, one which he had long been expecting. When asked what else he would suggest, Litvinov said there ought to be a three-Power meeting—Britain, the Soviet Union and France—at once, together with Rumania and any other smaller Powers who could be trusted. The meeting should be in Paris, not Geneva—to show the Germans that “we mean business”. The British delegates asked Litvinov what military preparations could be made (there was an idiotic rumour circulating in Geneva that Litvinov had come with “twenty high Red Army officers” in his delegation: in reality, there was not one). Litvinov replied that he was not a military man, but military and air experts could come, ready for staff talks, when the Three-Power meeting was held. He also informed the British delegates more fully about the straight talk with the Poles that morning. Lord de la Warr promised to report this “very important information” to London, and to “keep in touch”.

This is what passed between the three delegates, as recorded in British official dispatches<sup>43</sup>—amplified a little by what became known shortly afterwards to one or two correspondents at Geneva. Nothing whatever that could help Czechoslovakia came of the conversation, and Litvinov never heard any more (either of this talk or, indeed, anything else from the British Government before Munich). Chamberlain and Halifax had obviously not intended the meeting to lead to

<sup>43</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. II, pp. 497-8.



any practical results, since they themselves were pursuing quite a different policy. Their only purpose was to strengthen their hand in bargaining with Hitler<sup>44</sup>—and this was shown in a very characteristic way, three days later.

On the evening of the 26th, as described in a previous chapter, there was a high state of tension in Europe. Negotiations with Hitler had broken down. Czechoslovakia had mobilised, some preparatory measures were being taken in Britain and France: Germany had of course concentrated large armies round the frontiers of Czechoslovakia long ago. At this moment, as Winston Churchill has described, he had a long discussion in the afternoon with the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary<sup>45</sup>—it is very unfortunate that he has not revealed any hint of what passed between them—as a result of which the famous communiqué, drafted by a Foreign Office official, was approved by Lord Halifax and issued soon after 8 p.m. The essential passage in it stated that “if in spite of the efforts made by the British Prime Minister, a German attack is made upon Czechoslovakia, the immediate result must be that France will be bound to come to her assistance, and Great Britain and Russia will certainly stand by France”. Broadcast the same evening, it was printed in the newspapers of the 27th.

This statement was issued (as was stated earlier) without the slightest consultation with Litvinov or any other Soviet representative—although there was ample time to have done so, if this had been desired. It was as great a surprise to Litvinov as to anyone else—all the more because it is entirely untrue that he had been in touch with “French and British officials at Geneva on September 25 and 26”, as some have written.<sup>46</sup> In reality, none of them had been near him since the talk with the British delegates three days before. The reason for this was obvious: he would never have agreed to the words, “in spite of the efforts made by the British Prime Minister”, with their implication that they made for peace. On the contrary, the Soviet view of these “efforts”—as was explicitly stated in the *Pravda* article quoted above—was that their aim was “to deceive world opinion, to deceive the people, and beneath the flag of peace-bringing gestures to bring off an agreement with the aggressors”; and this only brought war nearer.

<sup>44</sup> On Litvinov's arrival in Geneva, nearly three weeks before, the writer asked him what he thought the prospects were. He replied concisely: “The British and French will sell the Czechs.”

<sup>45</sup> Churchill, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

<sup>46</sup> E.g. S. H. Thomson, *Czechoslovakia in European History* (Princeton University Press, 1943), pp. 345-6.

Litvinov's opinion therefore was that the communiqué was intended—like the de la Warr interview—to create the appearance of unity between the three Powers, without the slightest intention of really creating it. And this could only be for the purpose of impressing Hitler sufficiently to get him to accept the surrender of Czechoslovakia without war.

The next few days proved that Litvinov was right.

In the meantime, the Soviet Union continued to prepare for real defence of Czechoslovakia, if it were called upon to furnish it. It was during the 26th that, as mentioned earlier, Gamelin's chief of staff received the message from Voroshilov—many infantry divisions, a mass of cavalry, numerous tank formations and the bulk of the Soviet Air Force, ready to take the field. The Soviet armed forces were “put into a state of battle preparedness”: air squadrons were ready, not only for co-operation with the divisions on the western frontier, mentioned in the message to Gamelin, but to fly to Czechoslovakia.<sup>47</sup> The *New York Times* Riga correspondent, and *The Times* Warsaw correspondent, reported on the 26th that near its western frontiers the Soviet Union had concentrated 330,000 infantry, five corps of cavalry, 2000 planes and 2000 tanks. So certain of these concentrations was Gamelin that on the 28th he asked that the Soviet armies should “not take the offensive against Poland without giving us warning beforehand”.<sup>48</sup> A *Havas* message printed in the French papers of the 27th had repeated not only that the Soviet Government was ready for immediate discussions on “close military collaboration” with Britain and France, but that various preparatory measures for civilian mobilisation were being taken.

Even as late as September 28, when Alexander Kirk, the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires, presented President Roosevelt's proposal that the U.S.S.R. should send appeals to continue negotiations to Germany, Britain, France and Czechoslovakia (!), Potemkin replied that an international conference—such as the United States had in the meantime proposed to Hitler—“would prove more effective in the present circumstances than the mediation of France and Great Britain”. The U.S.S.R. was ready to take part in such a conference, just as it had been at the annexation of Austria, when it proposed one.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> *Istoria Mejdunarodnykh Otnoshenii i vneshnei politiki S.S.S.R.* (Moscow, 1957), p. 243. Z. Fierlinger, *Na Slujbe Chechoslovakii*, quoted by *Voprosy Istorii*, *loc. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>48</sup> Gamelin, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

<sup>49</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 617: the text of Potemkin's statement was published in *Izvestia* of September 29.

That was the last the U.S.S.R.—or anyone—heard of an international conference.

It was also the only contact with a "Munichite" Power between September 23 and September 29, when Chamberlain set out for the meeting with Hitler. On that day Lord Halifax invited Maisky to come and see him, to try and persuade the Soviet Ambassador that the only reason why the Soviet Union was not invited to Munich was that Hitler and Mussolini would not sit down with its representative—and even that the de la Warr interview on September 23, the only case in six months, showed that "we were fully alive to the importance of working as closely as we might with his Government at this juncture". The Foreign Secretary was evasive when Maisky asked whether the Czechoslovak Government would be represented at Munich. In short, Lord Halifax had good reason for the melancholy remark, at the end of his note of the meeting, that Maisky's "general attitude seemed to me, as indeed it was likely to be, one of some suspicion".<sup>50</sup>

The Ambassador's suspicion was justified. In reality, this interview prepared the way for the untrue assertions endorsed a few days later by Sir Samuel Hoare in the House of Commons (October 3), that consultation with the U.S.S.R. had been "adequate", and by Earl Winterton, another member of the Government (October 10), in a speech at Shoreham, that the Soviet Union did not offer help during the Czechoslovak crisis, but "only made very vague promises owing to her military weakness". The purpose of these untruths was obvious—to try and shift the blame from the real culprits to the U.S.S.R.

The reply to Hoare (and to simultaneous assertions in the French press inspired by the Quai d'Orsay, about the Soviet Union being fully consulted),<sup>51</sup> was given in a Tass communiqué on October 4. It said that in the interviews of Bonnet with Souritz, and of Lord Halifax with Maisky, during the final period, the two Soviet Ambassadors "were given no information other than what had appeared in the daily press". There was neither conference nor agreement with the Soviet Government. France and Britain had "confined themselves merely to informing the Soviet Government of what had already happened". The reply to Winterton came in a statement from the Soviet Embassy in London (October 11), recalling Litvinov's speech at Geneva on September 21, and describing Winterton's assertions as "a complete perversion". On November 14, the Soviet Embassy's

<sup>50</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 623-5.

<sup>51</sup> Werth, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

charge was fully supported by Labour leaders in the House of Commons—but both Chamberlain and Winterton characteristically avoided either retraction or apology, making use of Maisky's statement in a private talk with Winterton that "the incident was closed". However, the fact that members of the Government had been so embarrassed by the truth about Munich that they had to resort to such methods spoke for itself.

One may draw up a little summary. During the six months following its statement of March 17, authoritative Soviet spokesmen or newspapers on at least ten public occasions declared explicitly that the Soviet Union would fulfil its pledges to Czechoslovakia. Private assurances of the most definite character were in addition given six times to France (on three of these occasions with the proposal of military staff talks), four times to Czechoslovakia (apart from practical measures of military co-operation) and three times to the United Kingdom (including once with a proposal of staff talks)—although it had no treaty of mutual assistance with the U.S.S.R. All the proposals and statements made to France and Czechoslovakia, so far as the Soviet Government knew, went to Great Britain more or less automatically. In addition, Litvinov informed all three governments of the explicit reply given to the German Ambassador on August 22. Ten public, and a minimum of fourteen private, assurances in six months—with a number of proposals for staff talks—could really leave no doubt in the minds of anyone not determined to be deaf and blind.

Moreover, the Soviet Union had actually been engaged in successful combat with one member of the aggressor bloc—Japan—during this period, and had shown its readiness to defy all three aggressors by supplying munitions and technical aid to their victims, Spain and China—knowing that the British and French Governments would hardly shed a tear, much less give any help, if the Soviet Union were attacked. Thus no one could really doubt the readiness of the Soviet Government to fit words with deeds.<sup>52</sup>

By contrast, the farthest the British Government ever went in public to commit itself before September 26 (when there was no

<sup>52</sup> Which did not prevent various subsequent writers asserting that the Soviet Government could have "made their position clearer to the French and British Governments" (as though that was what was lacking) and displayed "reticence about the possibility of their being involved in war" (Beloff): that the Soviet Government "got by without having had to show their hand" and its attitude "was by no means unequivocal" (*Survey of International Affairs*): and that "Moscow never attempted to define the exact manner in which assistance would be made effective" (Seton-Watson)—five distinct offers of staff talks (one of them public), to do just that, evidently not being counted.



longer any question of defending Czechoslovakia but of dismembering her peaceably and quietly, if Hitler would agree) was the type of statement that war was like a fire: if it broke out, "who can say how far it would spread, or how many may be called upon to beat it out?"<sup>53</sup> In private, when the French were desperately trying to find out whether they would or would not get help if attacked, the British Government delivered itself of such pearls of great price as the following, on September 12: "So far as I am in a position to give any answer at this stage to M. Bonnet's question, it would have to be that while His Majesty's Government would never allow the security of France to be threatened, they are unable to make precise statements of the character of their future action, or the time at which it would be taken, in circumstances that they cannot at present foresee."<sup>54</sup>

As for the French Government, its spokesmen several times talked in public of the binding and indeed sacred character of their obligations to Czechoslovakia. But in private, as we know, they did their utmost to threaten and terrorise the Czechoslovak Government into surrendering that which the obligations had been intended to preserve—the territorial integrity and, in this case, independent existence of their country. The attitude of the French Government throughout could not be characterised better than by the note of what Lord Halifax told the British Cabinet after the May, 1938, meeting of the Council of the League of Nations at Geneva which he had attended. Bonnet had made it clear to him that he wanted His Majesty's Government to put as much pressure as possible on Beneš, "to save France from the cruel dilemma of dishonouring her agreements or becoming involved in war".<sup>55</sup>

This contrast between the Soviet attitude and that of the British and French Governments was not accidental, or one of different psychologies: it reflected fundamentally opposite policies—resisting Hitler, or co-operating with him.

<sup>53</sup> Sir John Simon's speech at Lanark, August 27, 1938.

<sup>54</sup> Facsimile printed in Bonnet, *De Washington au Quai d'Orsay*, pp. 360-1.

<sup>55</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, p. 299.

## CHAPTER IX

### COULD GERMANY HAVE FOUGHT?

#### 1. Strong or Weak?

MANY foreign correspondents in Germany, during the months before Munich, were struck by the contrast between the threatening speeches of the Nazi leaders, supported by the shouts of their followers at Nazi rallies, and the moods of the German people.

On August 3, 1938, the *Petit Parisien* printed a message from its Berlin correspondent, saying: "Lord Runciman's mission in Czechoslovakia is well received by the mass of the German population, which for several months has sincerely wished for an amicable solution, since it also felt that serious threats of war were hanging over Europe. This desire is the more explicable because, in spite of the daily efforts of propaganda, public opinion is in no way convinced of the existence of a Sudeto-Czech 'problem', and because for twenty years the German Reich maintained correct and even cordial relations with Prague. But it is not public opinion which decides here."

The *Petit Parisien* was a strongly conservative newspaper, the regular channel for "semi-official" expressions of opinion in France: and its correspondents abroad were not men of Radical opinions either (as for that matter, in this case, can be seen by the reference to the Runciman mission). The same summing up of the situation was presented in numerous other dispatches from Germany from newspaper correspondents of varied schools of thought.

The *Times* of August 16 published a dispatch from its Berlin correspondent, who had at midnight witnessed the departure of a special train for Trier with 500 men who had been mobilised, like hundreds of thousands more, for "special duty". Most of them were labourers, but many belonged to the white-collar class. "It was evident that many of them, suddenly called away from their daily work, were by no means sure what might be required of them when they reached their destinations, and were being launched into an unknown adventure for an indefinite time. It could be seen that many left with very mixed feelings." The effect of conscription was weighing heavily upon the economic life of the country, the correspondent reported:

not only were jobs closing down, but the strain was also shown by "a sudden shortage of certain kinds of food in Berlin".

A fortnight later, the *Reuter* correspondent in Berlin reported: "The constant alarm in the inspired German press over Czechoslovakia has given the man in the street in Germany a bad fit of nerves. Profoundly uninterested as the majority are in the future of the Sudeten Germans, and dreading the barest possibility of war, the German public fear that without being consulted in any way they may see the Fatherland plunged into deep waters. This political uneasiness comes on top of serious economic misgivings and the sense of personal hardship, especially among the working classes, where long hours and inadequate pay are often the rule. . . . There is no doubt that the German authorities are keenly alive to the unsatisfactory state of public opinion, especially in the capital and the large industrial districts."

It must be emphasised that this telegram described the feelings on August 30, long before the speeches at Nuremberg, before even the "Fourth Plan" of President Beneš. Soon the same uneasy mood reached very influential quarters. On September 9 the *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* printed a statement of its diplomatic correspondent that "information reached the British Government yesterday concerning the attitude of the German General Staff towards the policy being advocated by the radicals of the Nazi Party. The earlier reports that the generals are exerting their utmost influence to dissuade the Führer from ordering action which might precipitate a general war were fully confirmed." Later, when reports were published that General Beck, the Chief of the German General Staff, had resigned in the summer, but had been induced to suspend his resignation until after the crisis, repeated denials were issued in Berlin. As soon as the crisis was over, however, and events had shown that once again Hitler had been right in his anticipation of what the British and French Governments would do in defence of treaty obligations, Beck's resignation, and that of a group of generals who supported him, were accepted.

On the evening of September 11, when Goering had made a menacing speech describing Germany's perfect readiness for war, the *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* correspondent in Berlin wrote to his paper: "It may be very much doubted whether the attempt to make the prospect of war palatable will succeed with the mass of the people, as distinct from the Party enthusiasts now gathered at Nuremberg. The gravity of the situation is not fully appreciated here, but there is not the slightest doubt that a war, in circumstances as they are at present, would be extremely unpopular. The protective guards, whose

specific duty it is to maintain the morale of the civilian population, would find themselves faced from the outset by literally millions of people in a mood of latent disaffection. Although warlike utterances are taken at their face value in Nuremberg, the atmosphere elsewhere is completely different from that of 1914. . . . From other parts of Germany come telephonic reports from correspondents who confirm my observations in Berlin. The man in the street, they say, has no desire for war and is not even particularly hostile to Czechoslovakia. . . . The general impression is that the German people as a whole, as distinct from the younger members of the Nazi Party, does not place 100 per cent. confidence in its leaders."

On September 14 and 15, Keitel, the Commander-in-Chief, was urging caution on Hitler, reported a special correspondent recently in Germany, in the same newspaper. So much might have been exaggerated or highly-coloured gossip. But the correspondent could speak of what he had seen himself when he wrote: "I can state that there is little war enthusiasm anywhere in Germany. In Bavaria, murmurs against Herr Hitler's preparations are now swelling into a tide of open criticism of the Nazi régime. In Würtemberg and Baden, disapproval of Herr Hitler's policy, though less vocal, is just as intense. The most significant fact of all, perhaps, is that this opposition does not come from former Communist or other radical elements, but has its roots now in the middle class and the most Conservative sections of the German population."

On the same day an English correspondent in Berlin remarked how "ranks of silent, anxious spectators" had watched lorry-loads of troops racing for three hours through the streets: "Not a single cheer was sent up as they passed through Unter den Linden."

It might be objected that the *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* took up a critical attitude towards Chamberlain's policy. But the following appeared on September 29 in a newspaper which, more than any other, reflected the views of Chamberlain's closest friends—*The Times*—from its Berlin correspondent:

"There remains a large question mark in the back of every German mind, and a latent suspicion that all may not be as simple as the Party leaders would have the people believe. If it should be true that Czechoslovakia would not fight her war alone against German aggression, that the German people should find themselves irrevocably engaged in a general war, the moral shock would be tremendous. The fear of another great war lies deep in the German people." It was the young men in the army and the Party who were shouting loudest.



"The great majority who cluster quietly round the public loud-speakers in the streets, or sit gravely in cafés or at home to hear Herr Hitler's voice on the wireless, do not share this fervent confidence. On the contrary, their one prayer and hope is for peace. . . . The German people, moreover, are not merely fearful of war and anxious for peace. They appear to be positively apathetic towards the whole Sudeten German question, in spite of the violently exaggerated propaganda to which they have been subjected during recent months. This propaganda has been to a great extent a failure. . . . The Germans are a warrior race and will fight, and fight well, if ordered to do so; but there is bewilderment in Germany to-day which had no place in the Germany of 1914."

And after Munich the same correspondent wrote, on October 2: "The Reich has not yet exhausted its emotional relief at the last-minute salvation from a European war which, in the opinion of most sections of the population, it would almost certainly have lost."

This accumulation of contemporary opinion<sup>1</sup> does not prove, of course, that Hitler might not, by some unguarded or over-confident gesture, have precipitated a war even had there been a closed front of the Powers against him; nor yet that, had such a war been started, there would have been an instant revolution; nor yet again that, in the first weeks of the war, the German army would not have fought, or that the German population would not have submitted to war-time measures. But it does show that the internal condition of Germany was far more unfavourable for a large-scale war than it had been in 1914, in spite of the extreme efforts of Nazi propaganda, and that the German Government would have had to reckon very seriously with this undeniable fact, had an invasion of Czechoslovakia involved it in war with a formal coalition of the great and small Powers.

These considerations were the more telling because, from a strictly military point of view, Germany was far from the position of crushing superiority which its rulers would fain have had believed. Of this we have evidence, revealed by diplomatic archives and the documents of the Nuremberg trial of major war criminals in 1946, which the journalists of 1938 did not possess.

On April 4, 1938—General Keitel stated in evidence at the Nuremberg trial—Germany possessed twenty-four infantry divisions, one armoured division, one mountain division and one cavalry division:

<sup>1</sup> Much the same opinions were recorded by the American journalist William L. Shirer, *Berlin Diary* (New York, 1941), pp. 142-3; and, remarkably enough, by King Boris of Bulgaria (*D.B.F.P.*, vol. III, pp. 142-6).

ten infantry divisions and one armoured division were being formed: and seven or eight reserve divisions, in the process of formation, would (it was expected) be complete by October that year.<sup>2</sup> This made a total of well under fifty divisions—and what state of training would they be in, to attack the forty well-armed and trained Czechoslovak divisions, not to speak of nearly a hundred divisions of the French army and the far greater armed forces of the U.S.S.R.? Yet throughout 1938 (he said) Germany kept no more than five divisions in the West.<sup>3</sup> It was all she could spare. She was never in 1938 in a position to withstand a concentrated attack by Poland, France and Czechoslovakia together, said Jodl.<sup>4</sup> "It was out of the question that with five fighting divisions and seven reserve divisions we should have held the western fortifications, which were nothing but a large construction site, against a hundred French divisions. That was militarily impossible," Jodl said in evidence<sup>5</sup> on June 4, 1946.

It is hardly surprising that, in a conversation with the Czechoslovak Minister in London at this time (April 5, 1938), Sir Alexander Cadogan, the Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, said that "notwithstanding all assurances, Germany was afraid of Russia".<sup>6</sup>

Keitel admitted (April 4, 1946) that on April 21, 1938, he had "heard suggestions about preparations for war against Czechoslovakia": but he had considered that "this operation could not be carried out by the Army, in view of the military strength which I knew to be ours at the time".<sup>7</sup> In reality (as is shown in the memorandum by Hitler's aide-de-camp Schmundt) these "suggestions" had been made by Hitler on the day mentioned, in the instructions for "Operation Green" against Czechoslovakia, which were drawn up the following day. The plan bore unmistakable traces of the anxiety about the military position: it laid down that "outstanding military successes" must be won within the first four days—by concentric motorised attacks from various directions—otherwise there would be a European war.<sup>8</sup> The danger of involving the major Powers was again underlined in the revised and expanded directive submitted by Keitel to Hitler on May 20.<sup>9</sup>

"The German Army is still very far short of completing its organisation and armament", the British military attaché in Berlin, Col. Mason-Macfarlane, had noted on May 9.<sup>10</sup> There was "little doubt" that it was "not ready for a European war"—he evidently told

<sup>2</sup> *Trial*, part XI, p. 49. <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10. <sup>4</sup> *Trial*, part XV, p. 320.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 368. <sup>6</sup> *D. & M.*, vol. I, p. 103. <sup>7</sup> *Trial*, part XI, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 239-40. <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 299-303. <sup>10</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, p. 271.

William Strang, who visited the Berlin Embassy on behalf of the Foreign Office, on May 28 and 29.<sup>11</sup>

But on May 30, as we know, Hitler gave directions for the revision of "Operation Green" so as to provide for an attack on Czechoslovakia "in the near future". The entry in Jodl's diary shows what fears this aroused: "The whole contrast becomes acute once more between the Führer's intention that we must do it this year and the opinion in the Army that we cannot do it as yet, as most certainly the Western Powers will interfere and we are not yet equal to them."<sup>12</sup>

Preparations were now energetically pushed ahead. But it is noteworthy that on July 27, nearly two months later, Mason-Macfarlane was reporting: "I am continually coming across evidence that Germany as a whole is not ready for war this autumn"; and even Nevile Henderson, his chief, confessing to Halifax on August 6: "If we really showed our teeth, Hitler would not dare to make war to-day."<sup>13</sup>

That this was an accurate assessment of the situation is shown by a memorandum submitted by General Beck, then Chief of Staff, to von Brauchitsch, the Commander-in-Chief, on July 16, protesting against the decision to attack Czechoslovakia "until the military situation is basically changed". At present, he said, "I consider it hopeless, and this view is shared by all my Quartermasters—General and departmental chiefs of the General Staff who would have to deal with the preparation and execution of a war against Czechoslovakia."<sup>14</sup> Failing to get any change, Beck resigned at the beginning of August. A similar current of opinion to Beck's showed itself at a staff conference held by Hitler on August 10. The generals were by no means enthusiastic about the defences in the west, and Jodl noted that this opinion was "held very widely within the Army General Staff": one of them even said the fortifications could only be held for three weeks. This made Hitler very angry: but Jodl wrote that the opposition between Hitler's opinions and those of the generals might "cause immense political damage" and was "common talk".<sup>15</sup>

This common talk spread pretty far. An indication that by the beginning of September it had reached London was given by the diplomatic journalist, quoted earlier. None but a handful knew that it was brought by a representative of the generals, Ewald von Kleist, who at great personal risk came to London on August 18 to say that they

<sup>11</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, p. 413. <sup>12</sup> Trial, part II, p. 11. <sup>13</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. II, pp. 16, 58.

<sup>14</sup> Memorandum printed in W. Foerster, *Ein General kämpft gegen den Krieg* (Munich, 1949), quoted in Namier, *In the Nazi Era* (1952), p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> Trial, part III, p. 325.

were all against war, but wanted help from outside: either by Great Britain stating plainly that she would fight with France if Czechoslovakia were invaded, or by promises of support for a military and monarchist *coup d'état* against Hitler. (He saw Vansittart and Churchill, who reported to Chamberlain and Halifax respectively: but got no tangible encouragement.)<sup>16</sup>

Information about the German fortifications was also reaching France. "The Siegfried Line was not comparable to the Maginot Line", Daladier told the British Ambassador in Paris on September 8. There was very little concrete. It mostly consisted of field-works. Work on it had been unduly hasty.<sup>17</sup> (Jodl's evidence at Nuremberg, that the German fortifications in the west were only a large "construction site", has already been quoted.) On that very day Jodl noted in his diary that he, like General Stülpnagel, the chief of staff of the future army of invasion, was "worrying" about Hitler's recent statement implying that he was ready to fight the Western Powers. The only consolation Jodl had was that perhaps those Powers were only bluffing.<sup>18</sup>

What was the position on the eve of Munich? Here are two entirely independent testimonies. One from the inside: by the late autumn of 1938, after all the new and intensive efforts decided upon by Hitler at the end of May, Germany disposed of fifty-five divisions, including reserve divisions, and some "only poorly equipped".<sup>19</sup> Thus the April estimate had been exceeded by only nine or ten divisions: and of the fifty-five, five fighting divisions and seven reserve divisions were kept in the west—leaving forty-three divisions for Czechoslovakia and elsewhere. The other estimate is that of the Intelligence Department of the French army, on which Gamelin based his report to Chamberlain on September 26. France would begin with a hundred divisions. Germany had an imperfect and incomplete army, a shortage of petrol, and only air superiority on her side. Czechoslovakia would have thirty divisions (actually a considerable underestimate) against forty German divisions.<sup>20</sup> And this other disparity (if the German "lightning offensive" against Czechoslovakia was intended to succeed) took no account of the U.S.S.R.

After Munich the general staff of the Czechoslovak army, which had several officers of the German general staff in its service throughout, drew up a secret memorandum on the state of the German army

<sup>16</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. II, pp. 683-9. <sup>17</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. II, p. 269.

<sup>18</sup> Trial, part II, p. 18. <sup>19</sup> Jodl's evidence at Nuremberg, Trial, part XV, p. 369.

<sup>20</sup> Gamelin, *Servir*, vol. II, pp. 351-2.



in 1938, which has been published after the war. "The German army at the end of September, i.e. in the sixth week of its intensified mobilisation, had in the majority of its regiments two battalions. The units consisted of insufficiently trained reservists. In many battalions there were no machine-gun companies, there was a shortage of heavy artillery for active use against our fortifications. While the German army did have a considerable superiority in aircraft over ours, the majority of the pilots had had only three or four months' training. As regards the morale of the soldiers, the spirit of the army, as the Germans themselves put it, was similar to that which predominated in the German army during its retreat in 1918. Our army was well equipped, its reservists well trained, its permanent fortifications reliable, its morale excellent. In these circumstances our army had all the conditions for a successful struggle with the German army."<sup>21</sup>

Was this a self-consoling exaggeration? In fact, even a year later, when Germany was entering the second world war in September, 1939, she had only seventy-five divisions, with a "ridiculously low" supply of munitions, Jodl said at Nuremberg.<sup>22</sup> Hitler himself admitted to his military commanders on November 23, 1939, that it was *after* Munich that "the Western fortifications had to be finished".<sup>23</sup> Keitel said in evidence about Munich: "We were extremely glad that it had not come to a military operation, because throughout the time of preparation we had always been of the opinion that our means of attack against the frontier fortifications of Czechoslovakia were inadequate. From a purely military point of view we were not strong enough to stage an attack which would involve the piercing of the frontier fortifications: we lacked material for such an attack."<sup>24</sup>

With such a picture at the back of their minds, the general staff presented a memorandum to Hitler on September 27 which (although reported only in the French press after Munich) has been accepted as probably genuine by a number of writers.<sup>25</sup>

It referred to the low morale of the German people; many cases of indiscipline and insubordination in the Reichswehr; the unsatisfactory condition of the Siegfried Line, and the absence of fortifications in the Aachen and Saarbrücken sectors; the shortage of officers and N.C.O.s (eighteen divisions would be without any at all, in the event

<sup>21</sup> Quoted by Kral, *op. cit.*, pp. 224-5. The exact reference to the archives of the Ministry of National Defence is: MNO.hlst. 1-7 odd., čj. 1313/1939.

<sup>22</sup> *Trial*, part XV, pp. 320 *et seqq.*

<sup>23</sup> *Trial*, part II, p. 73.

<sup>24</sup> *Trial*, part XI, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Ripka, *op. cit.* (1939), pp. 212-14; Churchill, *op. cit.* (1948), pp. 245-6; *Survey of International Affairs*, 1938, vol. II (1951), p. 415; Namier, *In the Nazi Era* (1952), p. 157.

of a general mobilisation); the military effects of defeat; and its probability, in any but a strictly local war. The account in a French journal which printed a summary of the memorandum went on to say that on the evening of the 27th Admiral Raeder added his warning in a personal interview with Hitler—a warning reinforced by the mobilisation of the British Fleet, announced later in the night.

Thus there is sufficient evidence to show that Germany was by no means as powerful as Hitler's speeches tried to make the world believe, and that both popular alarm and disquiet among the generals really existed, and with good grounds. The lessons of the Austrian "campaign" of March 11-12—when at one time "70 per cent. of all the armoured vehicles and cars were stranded on the road from Salzburg and Passau to Vienna, because the drivers had been hurriedly taken from their driving course to be given this task",<sup>26</sup> were fairly widely known too.

Indeed, all the foregoing is contained within Keitel's reply to Col. Eger, of the Czechoslovak army, at Nuremberg: "The purpose of the agreement of Munich was to eliminate Russia from Europe, gain time and complete our armaments."

## 2. The Forces of Resistance

What of the other side?

So far as Czechoslovakia is concerned, something has been said already, in Chapter VII. Even hostile observers had to admit the strength, morale, good training and good equipment of its forces: 1,500,000 of its soldiers (thirty-five divisions, or 75 per cent. of the available trained effectives) were under arms at the end of September. It had the usual troubles of a State where armaments, like everything else involving public expenditure, are a question of business contracts—delays in deliveries, competition of foreign customers, and consequent shortages or inadequacy of certain equipment.<sup>27</sup> This notably applied to the lack of battalion motor transport for carrying the soldiers' equipment, as compared with the German army. But taken as a whole, the armed forces compared favourably with those of any in Europe. They had several hundred tanks and upwards of 1500 planes: moreover, behind them stood a heavy industry which put Czechoslovakia among the seven most industrialised countries of

<sup>26</sup> Jodl's evidence at Nuremberg (*Trial*, part XV, p. 323).

<sup>27</sup> Kral, *op. cit.*, pp. 232-42, 250-2, gives a number of instances drawn from the Czechoslovak archives.

Europe.<sup>28</sup> Her steel industry had a higher output than that of Italy. A military correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian* (September 15) was impressed, after a tour of inspection, by the blockhouses and latest mountain artillery in the frontier mountains. We are told that the British and Italian military attachés in Berlin, who accompanied the German forces moving into Czechoslovakia after Munich, noticed the "unmistakable astonishment and awe on the faces of the German officers as they encountered defence after defence which did not appear on the carefully prepared maps provided by their Military Intelligence"—and the still deeper impression on the German generals when they came to the basic defence line, "formidable fortifications on which an assault might well have been held up for a considerable period".<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, during the months before Munich the Germans had noticed that the steady reinforcement of the air force with Soviet bomber planes had begun: their military attaché in Moscow reported on August 18 on his information, through Italians who had watched the operation, that for several months past the same ten Czechoslovak pilots had been arriving at Odessa, by rail through Rumania, *every week*—evidently flying as many planes back to Czechoslovakia, he concluded.<sup>30</sup> Many aerodromes had been built against the contingency of a rapid increase in the number of fighting planes; and it would be ridiculous to suppose that, if incredible geographical difficulties were overcome in ensuring the supply of aeroplanes to Spain and to China, there were insuperable obstacles in the way of a more adequate and regular supply to Czechoslovakia.

There is hardly any need to dwell on the complete contrast between the spirit of the German people, indicated by the reports quoted above, and the spirit with which the people of Czechoslovakia would have entered the war, had it been forced on them. The explosions of feeling throughout the country on May 21, and again after the Berchtesgaden terms became known on September 21, are sufficient evidence.

The military strength of France lay in her close on a hundred divisions: and the ability of her army at that time to break through the still unsettled fortifications of Germany in the west—defended by a force effectively less than a quarter of the size of a French attacking force, even allowing for heavy reserves to guard the Italian and Spanish frontiers—could hardly be doubted. If the unsatisfactory state of the French air force, compared with that of Germany, has to be taken into

<sup>28</sup> Recognised expressly as such by their permanent seats on the Governing Body of the International Labour Office.

<sup>29</sup> Wheeler-Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

<sup>30</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 587-8.

account, it must be remembered that in tanks the German army in 1938 was nothing like what it was a year later, after taking over the 600 tanks of Czechoslovakia and turning the Skoda works—the biggest in Central Europe—exclusively to armaments manufacture for their purposes.

Had the French Government made clear that it would throw its sword into the scale beside that of Czechoslovakia, to defend the latter's territorial integrity, there is evidence enough that the German military leaders would have been given pause.

How much more, then, when they already knew that the forces of the Soviet Union were pledged in that case to support Czechoslovakia by the terms of the Soviet-Czechoslovak and Soviet-French mutual assistance treaties. The Soviet Government has not published any details of the forces it had ready for the field in September, 1938, similar to those it issued after the war for September, 1939.<sup>31</sup> But apart from the evidence—true, at second hand—provided by General Gamelin of the offer he received from Voroshilov on September 26, 1938, which was quoted in a previous chapter, there is another estimate, drawn up by experienced hands, which cannot have erred on the side of optimism. This is the one given by Ambassador Davies to Secretary of State Hull on June 6, 1938, in his *Brief on the Facts*, summarising the situation in the U.S.S.R. as he saw it. The military figures were based primarily on those collected by his military attaché. They estimated, under arms, 1,300,000 men and about 5,000,000 trained reserves; 4000 tanks available for immediate use; 4500 planes in service, with an annual output of 4800.<sup>32</sup> It is interesting that, when the French military attaché reported, in the autumn of the same year, much the same figures (1,300,000 men, 4500 tanks, 3500 planes—of these 400 heavy bombers in the western districts—and 150,000 pilots trained or training), the French War Ministry (which had earlier refused a Soviet light fighter) invited him "to be more moderate in his appreciation of the Soviet military forces".<sup>33</sup>

But could the U.S.S.R. have rendered immediate and effective military assistance? Such a question could only be asked because the public in the Western countries—and not only the public, but as we have seen, the Governments also—were still a prey to fantastic distortions of the real situation in the U.S.S.R. It was a significant message from the Riga correspondent of *The Times* on September 7 (the day of the sinister leading article previously mentioned)—both the

<sup>31</sup> *Falsifiers of History* (Soviet Information Bureau, 1938), Section 3.

<sup>32</sup> Davies, *op. cit.*, pp. 408-9.

<sup>33</sup> Coulondre, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-9.



newspaper and the correspondent, be it noted, singularly unprejudiced in favour of the U.S.S.R.—that gave as the view prevailing in Moscow “that the Red Army, especially the air fleet, will intervene if Czechoslovakia asks for help. The reorganisation of the Kiev and White Russian military districts is interpreted as preparation for this, especially as these commands have been strengthened to nearly a war basis, and all frontier garrisons have been reinforced.”

Nor did this apply only to these frontier districts. On the same day, the Soviet newspapers received from a special correspondent of the Tass Agency an account of the closing day of the military manoeuvres in the Moscow district, which had been conducted on a full war-time basis, with the participation of all arms, and in the presence of Marshal Voroshilov, the People's Commissar for Defence. “The training demonstrated that the units of the Moscow military district, like the whole Red Army, are in a state of mobilised preparedness, and are capable at any moment of levelling a heavy blow at the enemy”, concluded the report. This conclusion, with its use of the unusual and significant term, “mobilised preparedness”, was the first item on the wireless news in Russian from Moscow that night; but the circles which were at that time specialising in hearing “revelations” on the Soviet wireless discreditable to the U.S.S.R. missed this important occasion completely.

The messages in the *New York Times* and *London Times* on September 26, about the heavy Soviet forces available in the western commands of the Soviet Union for immediate action, have been mentioned earlier. The figures given are in keeping with the message given to Gamelin's assistant on that day by the Soviet military attaché in Paris.

It is relevant to point out that on November 7 that year there took part, in the Soviet anniversary celebration parades, and only in those towns where figures were given by the newspapers, 1991 up-to-date fighter and bomber planes.

So far as the spirit of the Soviet people is concerned (contrary to the ludicrous secret reports sent in by the British Embassy), visitors from the U.S.S.R. who were in Western Europe during the crisis spoke in private conversation of the spirit of quiet determination in which factory workers in Moscow and collective farmers, at various places which they had had occasion to visit in the provinces, met the increasingly grave news from Central Europe during the summer and autumn; as well as their deep sympathy for Czechoslovakia. There can be no doubt that they would have fought with the same determination that

they were prepared to show in resistance to the Japanese, at the beginning of August. During the last ten days of August, when the 1917 and half of 1918 classes were called up for military training, the People's Commissariat for Defence was inundated with thousands of requests from young people, to be called up ahead of their time.

The spirit of the army was shown, at the very time when the German forces were demonstratively gathering around Czechoslovakia, by the operations of the Special Far Eastern Red Army against the Japanese, in exceptionally difficult terrain, around Lake Hassan.

But were there not difficulties ahead with transit of the Soviet forces going to the help of Czechoslovakia? The collections of diplomatic papers published after the war, and a number of commentaries on them—particularly, in French, those of Georges Bonnet, who was Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1938 (*De Washington au Quai d'Orsay*) and, in English, those of Professor Arnold J. Toynbee and his co-authors of the *Chatham House Survey of International Affairs* (vol. II for 1938)—have made much of these difficulties and contradictions, so far as Rumania is concerned. Yet attentive examination of the documents (apart from post-war apologetics by men anxious to curry favour, in the years when the “cold war” was beginning) reveal a perfectly clear and understandable picture. Rumania was ruled by an extremely reactionary class of landowners and financial adventurers: but a large section of them realised very well what Rumania's complete absorption by Germany would mean for themselves. Moreover, there were substantial terrorist organisations already in existence in Rumania, in the pay of Germany, which had already secured the elimination from the Government of Nicolae Titulescu, one of the most capable and far-sighted European diplomats and supporters of collective security. Rumania's interest was to join in any measures that would effectively check Nazi Germany's advance to the Black Sea by peaceful methods or, failing that, in war.

But the point was that they must be *effective*; and, up to the very end, the Rumanian Government could see what everyone else in Europe could see—that, most of the time, the British and French Governments appeared to be more anxious to come to an agreement with Hitler, at any cost to everyone except themselves, rather than to resist him: and to carve Czechoslovakia up peacefully, rather than to protect her. To take up too definite a position, in these circumstances, meant that Rumania might find herself alone, “out on a limb” facing the dread Hitler, at a critical moment. On the other hand there were moments when it seemed as though resistance might

nevertheless be attempted. And so the Rumanian Government adopted a fluid, perpetually changing and seemingly contradictory position on the question of the right of passage of Soviet armed forces—yet one that falls into a distinct pattern.

The Germans were always suspecting Rumania of having definitely agreed to the passage of Soviet troops or planes, and even taxing them with it. In such cases the Rumanians flatly denied that anything of the kind was taking place. The *Documents on German Foreign Policy* for 1938 (vol. II) contain a number of such occasions. On June 3 the German Minister in Rumania cabled that he had learned that the general staff had agreed to Soviet planes flying non-stop over their country (p. 383); we have already seen that a report apparently confirming this came from the Moscow Embassy on August 18; on the 30th Eisenlohr reported from Prague that the Czechs were negotiating with Rumania the right of passage for 100,000 Soviet troops (p. 660). On September 26 the Rumanian Minister in Rome told the Italian Government that this request had been "emphatically refused" (p. 936); and on September 28 Comnen, the Rumanian Foreign Minister, told the German Minister that the right of passage had not even been discussed with Litvinov at Geneva, a fortnight before (p. 981).

The Rumanians were equally careful when dealing with people whom they suspected of being close friends of the Nazis, like Bonnet, or Ambassador Nevile Henderson, or the Polish Government. Thus Henderson, early in May, was given to understand in Berlin that they would not allow the passage of Soviet troops (*Documents on British Foreign Policy*, vol. I, p. 257). On May 2 Comnen, in Geneva, gave Bonnet a similar reply (*De Washington au Quai d'Orsay*, p. 126); which was repeated to Thierry the French Ambassador at Bucharest, as he cabled on July 7 (Bonnet, *op. cit.*, p. 163). Bonnet's manoeuvre with a reported anti-Czech declaration by the Rumanians at Berlin, about the same time—calculated to intimidate the Czechoslovak Government (*Documents and Materials Relating to the Eve of the Second World War*, vol. I, pp. 139-40) has been described earlier. On August 13 the Polish Ambassador in Berlin told Goering that Comnen had assured the Hungarians of Rumania's refusal and "Goering was pleased to hear this" (*ibid.*, p. 149). On September 11, in Geneva once again, Comnen again denied to Bonnet that Rumania would admit Soviet forces (Bonnet, *op. cit.*, pp. 201-3). And so on. The reports of United States diplomats at first contain several similar denials.

But on August 17 the German military attaché in Prague, in con-

versation with the British, claimed to have discovered that Rumania would allow the passage of Soviet planes to Czechoslovakia in war-time (*Documents on British Foreign Policy*, vol. II, p. 144). On the 31st, Thierry reported that planes would be allowed—a decision which Comnen confirmed to him on September 6 (this is reported not only by Bonnet, but in the German documents too, pp. 710-11 of the second volume). About September 12 or 13, the Rumanian Minister in Moscow told the French Ambassador that he would like to discuss military co-operation with the Russians (Coulondre, *op. cit.*, p. 158); and Thierry confirmed to Bonnet on September 12 and 16 that the Rumanians had now agreed to passage of aircraft (the ex-Minister published this in a letter to the Paris *Monde* on November 18, 1947). In short, as there appeared at last a chance that someone might possibly stand by Czechoslovakia, the Rumanian Government felt a little more secure. On September 18 the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister told the American Minister at Prague that "all was prepared for the passage of Soviet Russian troops over Rumania" (*F.R.U.S.*, vol. I, p. 615). And on September 19, at Geneva, Comnen told de la Warr, too, that in the event of war supplies, particularly planes, would be allowed to cross from the Soviet Union to Czechoslovakia (vol. II of the British *Documents*, p. 355).

The situation was summed up quite clearly by Ripka in 1939 (*op. cit.*)—that the official policy of Rumania "was in all respects that of a loyal ally, who did not wish merely to confine herself to a narrow interpretation of the legal obligations of the treaty which bound her to Czechoslovakia (p. 144). . . . There is no object in puzzling over the question of which route Soviet Russia would have chosen in going to the assistance of Czechoslovakia; since those who understood the situation are well aware that a route would have been found (p. 300)."

Obviously when Great Powers like France and Britain were playing fast-and-loose with their direct treaty and League Covenant obligations, such manoeuvring by a small country like Rumania was to be expected. And it was precisely in consideration of this that the Soviet Union, both before September and during it, pressed for a discussion at the League, or at least in an international conference, which would strengthen Rumania's hand.

The mood of the third partner in the Little Entente, Yugoslavia—and that notwithstanding the pro-German policy of her Prime Minister, Stoyadinovitch—could be gauged from the Belgrade telegram in the *Temps* of September 15, to the effect that the Czechoslovak



Legation there had already registered 100,000 Yugoslav volunteers to serve with the Czechoslovak army in the event of war. On September 24 the German Minister in Belgrade reported that street demonstrations in support of Czechoslovakia were having to be held back by the police.<sup>34</sup>

There was also the question of Poland. Had she ventured to attack Czechoslovakia, with or without Germany, we have already seen the serious consequences which this would have brought her from the east.

But no one who was among international diplomats during the month of crisis, whether at Geneva or in the great capitals, seriously believed that even the then Polish Government would have ventured on such a course, or would have remained neutral, had a war broken out in which Germany found ranged against her Great Britain, France, Czechoslovakia, the other States of the Little Entente, and the U.S.S.R. And this must have brought with it the application of the right of passage provided under Article 16 of the League Covenant.

In this connection it is important to realise what a powerful means of pressure on Poland the French and British Governments possessed—which they used against Czechoslovakia, without scruple or hesitation. That was to leave her defenceless to the Germans. "France should have demanded that Poland should submit to her obligations under the Covenant, and threatened to resume her liberty if Poland was obstinate", wrote Paul Reynaud in 1947, pointing out that this was done successfully when Poland was getting an armaments loan from France in 1936.<sup>35</sup> There should have been (in Warsaw) "a joint and solemn intervention" by France and Great Britain, wrote Robert Coulondre in 1950. "Was it not rather for Poland to choose between fidelity to a treaty which had registered her resurrection, and an isolation which would be fatal for her; and had we not the duty of putting her under the obligation to declare herself?"<sup>36</sup>

Wise words indeed—had the British and French Governments intended for one moment themselves to observe fidelity to the Covenant or to the Franco-Czechoslovak treaty!

To sum up. An act of madness might occur with anyone, and it might have occurred with Hitler. But Hitler's policy, hitherto, had not been distinguished by madness, whatever "acts" he might put on for the benefit of statesmen who needed the excuse. On the contrary, it had shown cold and deliberate calculation, and above all

<sup>34</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, p. 923.

<sup>35</sup> *La France a sauvé l'Europe*, vol. I, p. 126.

<sup>36</sup> *De Staline à Hitler*, p. 154.

sensitive appraisal of the degree to which his apparent adversaries were wishing to co-operate. When they showed that they were not co-operating—as on the occasion of the German fortifications on the Moroccan coast in Franco territory, directed against France (January, 1937) and of the Nyon Conference against German and Italian "unknown submarines" which had begun attacking British warships (September, 1937)—Hitler had shown that he was very accessible to reason.

There is every ground for thinking that on this occasion, too, had the Powers interested in peace stood together in defence of international security, Hitler would have listened to reason rather than launch a general war, in which the defeat of Germany would have been certain and overwhelming.

## LABOUR LEADERS AND CZECHOSLOVAKIA

EXAMINATION of the record of the Socialist parties in Great Britain and France during the maturing of Hitler's plans against Czechoslovakia shows that in both cases their leaders presented no effective resistance whatsoever to the plans of their respective governments; and the most charitable judgment that can be passed is that they failed until the very last stage to realise what issues were involved (though it is hard to believe).

*In Britain*

In the case of the British Labour Party, its leaders, up to September, 1938, refused to give whole-hearted support to the Czechoslovaks, and tolerated ambiguous pronouncements by those who would be universally interpreted as speaking on their behalf—which could only have the effect of encouraging Nazi ambitions. In its practical results, such a policy did not differ so very much from that of the British Government itself: though no doubt the motives were very different.

The first official response to the Soviet Note was favourable. The *Daily Herald* on March 18 called it "precisely the kind of practical lead which millions of British people have been hoping for years would come from their own Government", and urged "welcome and support" for the Soviet initiative. But evidently this did not please the Labour Party leadership.

During the House of Commons debate on the annexation of Austria, on March 24, the Labour leaders made no attempt to support the Soviet Note, and tacitly supported the British Government's refusal. The Note itself was mentioned only very cursorily in the debate. Mr. Attlee's criticism of the Government's policy was that it was dangerous because of "weakness, drift and uncertainty" (although Ethiopians, Spaniards and Chinese could have told him that they were quite certain of its "drift"). The Speakers' Note sent out to its propagandists and spokesmen by the head office of the Labour

Party, on March 18, did not even mention Czechoslovakia or the Soviet proposal!

That this was not a chance omission was shown by the editorial of the *Daily Herald* on March 22, which congratulated the Czechoslovak Government on a first promise of concessions to the Sudeten Germans, and expressed the hope that it would "pursue the policy of equality for minorities to the very limit". This would strengthen the chance of "securing sufficient European co-operation to safeguard peace in Central Europe", since the denial of equality to minorities was "a constant threat to peace".

The striking omission in this editorial was its failure to point out that the real threat to peace came from Hitler. By its suggestion that peace could be safeguarded through concessions to the Hitlerites it not only failed to point out that a common front of peace-loving Powers was the only way to restrain Hitler, i.e. to maintain its previous endorsement of Litvinov's proposals, but also took its stand in principle with the Tory Prime Minister. To that extent the Labour newspaper actually facilitated Hitler's task. And, in keeping with this attitude (and after an interview between Chamberlain and the General Council of the Trades Union Congress on March 26), the Labour Party Executive rejected on April 13 the proposal of a United Peace Alliance first put forward by *Reynolds News*, based on co-operation to overthrow the Government in the interests of resistance to Fascist aggression.

So also after the critical day of May 21. Only a few days before, Arthur Henderson, on behalf of the Labour Party, had asked the Government to give an assurance that it would not support any concessions "which would destroy any of the effective defences of Czechoslovakia against the Germans". This question, which the Government representative evaded in his reply, hit the real nail on the head, as subsequent events proved. But when Chamberlain came to Parliament to give an interim statement on negotiations (May 23), all Attlee could do was to express the hope that the settlement would not injure "the just rights of the Czech people"—an elastic phrase that could mean anything.

The *Daily Herald* next day, commenting on the crisis, also forgot all about the key issue raised by Henderson. It congratulated the Czechs on their coolness and the British and French Governments on their firmness. But it hastened to add that there was "no question of diplomatic victory or diplomatic defeat"—a soothing assurance which obscured what had happened, and once again, therefore, diverted



attention from the real nature of the danger. As though to make doubly sure, the paper went on to explain that "both Germany and Czechoslovakia have been reminded of the far-reaching consequences of any rash use of force". As Czechoslovakia could hardly have been thought to contemplate an armed attack on Germany, this phrase could only have referred in her case to the possibility that she would take stern measures to suppress the "fifth column" of treason, espionage and civil war, which was being openly organised by the Henleinites. Thus Hitler, who knew that the British and French warnings to him had been belatedly precipitated by the Czech determination to resist, now could also conclude that the leadership, at any rate, of the British Labour Party was at one with its Government in deprecating any drastic action against Henlein.

In mid-May the Labour Party leaders, while admitting that a people's front against Fascism and the Chamberlain Government might be necessary if this was "the sole condition for the preservation of peace and democracy", once again rejected the idea, proclaiming that "the road to peace lies through Socialism". In the meantime, therefore, Chamberlain could continue in his policy of "firmness".

On May 26 Henlein had given his notorious interview to the correspondent of the *Daily Mail*, threatening civil war and German intervention unless his demands were granted. In an interview which the *Daily Herald* correspondent in Prague was accorded by the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister, the correspondent actually suggested that the Henleinites might not only live peaceably in Czechoslovakia, practising the Nazi creed, but might be included in the Cabinet; a suggestion to which the Foreign Minister adroitly avoided replying. He emphasised instead the desire of the Czechoslovak Government for a fair understanding. In its editorial comment, nevertheless, the *Daily Herald* (May 27) found it possible to declare that the two interviews taken together "suggest that, given only good will, a solution inside the framework of a democratic Czechoslovak Republic is possible". Thus the organ of the Labour Party strengthened the impression that there was no real danger from the very nature of the Henleinite demands, and from what lay behind them. Four months later, the Labour Party leaders were wiser. In a Speakers' Note issued on September 16, they analysed the Henleinite memorandum presented on June 7, which "incorporated in more circumspect language" the Karlovy Vary speech of April 24. And they pointed out that this more "circumspect" document was "not in reality concerned with the alleged grievances of the Sudeten Germans, but aimed at the destruction of the Czechoslovak

State in its present democratic form, and at bringing it within the orbit of German domination". Unfortunately, this recognition came too late.

At the end of May, therefore, the Labour Party had been represented (without contradiction on their part) as considering the Henlein demands susceptible of forming at any rate part of the basis of an agreed settlement. To emphasise this, the *Daily Herald's* diplomatic correspondent wrote on May 28 that "there seems no irreconcilable opposition between the Sudeten and Czech positions", so far as local autonomy is concerned—a statement which was flagrantly at variance with everything that was known of Henlein and his source of inspiration.

In spite of growing uneasiness among the rank and file, and the information published about Lord Halifax's visit to Paris, the Labour Party's next pronouncement on the question of Czechoslovakia again came through the mouthpiece of the *Daily Herald*, and then only at the end of July. It was to express its qualified approval of Lord Runciman's mission, provided he were a genuinely independent counsellor, and not used as a means of intimidating the Czechoslovak Government! Such a statement of the position took no account of the preceding policy of the British Government, and implied that—contrary to that policy—Lord Runciman might be used for some purpose *other* than that of intimidating Czechoslovakia. By diverting attention from that real danger, the *Daily Herald* once again tranquillised public opinion in the Labour movement, and to that extent made smoother the path selected by Neville Chamberlain.

On August 29, the German Chargé d'Affaires in London was able to report that "for a whole week the attacks on Chamberlain had completely ceased". He thought this was because "a feeling of solidarity" was growing up.<sup>1</sup> For this feeling—reinforcing the pressure on Czechoslovakia—the Labour leaders of course bore prime responsibility. Looking back over the period as a whole in September, 1939, the German Ambassador von Dirksen also considered that in the months after the Czechoslovak mobilisation of May 21, the Czechoslovak question "lost its extreme acuteness", except for the "politically-minded public".<sup>2</sup>

The first public pronouncement by an official Labour organisation in Great Britain which broke completely with the policy of the Government came only when the game played in Czechoslovakia by the Runciman mission was suddenly exposed by the events of September 6-7. A manifesto was approved by a joint meeting of the

<sup>1</sup> *D. & M.*, vol. II, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.



General Council of the Trades Union Congress and the executives of the Labour Party and the Parliamentary Labour Party, held at Blackpool on September 7, and adopted by the Trades Union Congress itself the next day. The manifesto reads in its essential passages:

"The whole world stands to-day upon the brink of war. Appalling and irreparable disaster threatens the foundations of our civilisation, because of the unrestrained violence and display of military force by the aggressor States in these last seven years.

"In so grave and imminent a crisis, the British Labour movement is compelled to place on record its regret that so heavy a responsibility for this situation rests upon the indecisive and misdirected policy of the British Government. It is this weakness that has helped to undermine the authority and the prestige of the League of Nations." After a passage dealing with Spain, the manifesto proceeded:

"The failure to recognise the indivisibility of peace is emphasised anew in the threat to Czechoslovakia. The fate of the world is involved in its outcome. No State in the post-war epoch has a better record of ordered democratic government than Czechoslovakia. No State has treated its nationalities more honourably. It is making a generous offer to satisfy their fullest aspirations. The acceptance of its offer would remove any legitimate grievances that are now under discussion.

"Should the German Government, in spite of this, make war upon Czechoslovakia, it will brand itself as a traitor to humanity. Its provocative mobilisations and untruthful press campaigns impede the recovery of industry and trade, and poison international relationships.

"The German Government has demanded that Czechoslovakia yield its democracy to force and admit a totalitarian system within its boundaries. These demands are incompatible with the integrity and independence of Czechoslovakia. Every consideration of democracy forbids the dismemberment of the Czechoslovakian State by the subjection of the Sudeten German regions to Nazi Government control. British Labour emphatically repudiates the right of the British or any other government to use diplomatic or other pressure to compel an acceptance of such a humiliation. . . .

"The British Government must leave no doubt in the mind of the German Government that it will unite with the French and Soviet Governments to resist any attack upon Czechoslovakia. The Labour movement urges the British Government to give this lead, confident that such policy would have the solid support of the British people. . . .

"Peaceful change can only come through friendly negotiations.

Labour cannot acquiesce in the destruction of the rule of law by savage aggression. The British Labour movement, therefore, demands the immediate summoning of Parliament. It is in that historic assembly of our democratic State that these principles should be reaffirmed with the utmost energy and determination. Whatever the risk involved, Britain must make its stand against aggression. There is now no room for doubts or hesitation."

Although this manifesto represented fundamentally a break with previous good-humoured tolerance of Chamberlain's policy towards Czechoslovakia, it contained, nevertheless, certain passages which might still give room for doubts and hesitation about Labour policy. It treated the British Government's policy, once again, as one of indecision and "weakness", when there were sufficient facts available—first and foremost, the experiences of the Czechoslovak Government at the hands of the British Minister in Prague and Lord Runciman—to show that British policy was very firm and strong where Dr. Beneš was concerned, and weak only towards Hitler. This policy, in ordinary language, would rather be called one of co-operation with Germany than of indecision. The manifesto repudiated the right of the British Government to use diplomatic pressure on Czechoslovakia, as though it were a question of some abstract principle: and was silent about the notorious examples of that pressure, which had culminated only two days before in the ultimatums resulting in the "Fourth Plan" of President Beneš. It did not take up the one weapon which might have caused the British Government to hesitate—the threat to combine with other political groupings critical of Chamberlain in a national campaign for the overthrow of the Government.<sup>3</sup> Nor did it mark the opening of a national campaign pursued by the Labour movement itself. It was not until September 16, nine days later—days every one of which counted for a month of "normal" times—that the Labour Party headquarters ordered the holding of 3000 meetings against the Government's policy, and issued their first Speakers' Note on the Czechoslovak problem.

But in the interval there had been, first, the visit of Mr. Chamberlain to Berchtesgaden. The Labour Party's leader, Mr. Attlee, had in Parliament on September 14 expressed his approval of a journey which, any student of British policy up to that time should have seen, could only lead to acceptance of Hitler's fundamental aim—the annexation of the frontier districts, which in its turn meant laying Czechoslovakia

<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, local Labour Parties showing an inclination to do so were sharply called to order by their National Executive Committee.



prostrate at the feet of Germany. Even if this vital point had been missed previously, the declaration made to the press by an "authoritative spokesman" on the night of September 11 made it perfectly clear. That Mr. Attlee's statement was not due to a sudden access of unaccountable emotion could be seen by the editorial in the *Daily Herald* next day (September 15) under the eloquent heading: "Good Luck, Chamberlain!" Chamberlain's dramatic intervention was needed at this moment, said the paper, and he would receive "general support". It must "win the sympathy of opinion everywhere, irrespective of party". Whatever subsequent criticism the disillusioned Labour Party leaders levelled at the results which Chamberlain brought back from Berchtesgaden, that blank cheque, given him in advance, and in full knowledge of his previous policy, left them very little ground to stand upon.

The editorial declared that Britain must act with France and keep the U.S.S.R. fully informed. "Anything which in any way lessened that close co-operation would be disastrous"—an unmistakable suggestion that close co-operation existed already, which was not only utterly false, but widely known among journalists to be false, and therefore doubly dangerous. The readers of the *Daily Herald* were thus inspired with unjustifiable confidence upon the very point which, if the true facts were stated, would have caused them most alarm, and would have roused them to bring their influence to bear most effectively.

The editorial gave Chamberlain further blank cheques. The British people's attitude was to resist attempts by Germany "to settle what can and should be a matter of reasonable negotiation by an act of deliberate and unprovoked aggression". This was the very attitude of the "authoritative statement" on September 11, and of Chamberlain's later appeals to Hitler. It slurred over the essential principle that there could be no "reasonable negotiation" about further concessions after the "Fourth Plan", since they would involve finally destroying Czechoslovak integrity and independence: whereas the Government had deliberately held out the hope of such further concessions. It represented matters as though Hitler were threatening war over a demand which he could get by negotiation: which could only be a true reflection of the situation—as it was in the mouth of Mr. Chamberlain—if its author had in mind already the cession of the frontier districts. This the Blackpool manifesto had repudiated.

It could not be a question of committing the British people, the editorial stated—as though Chamberlain had not been committing

the British people, all through the long months of pressure on the Czechs. Chamberlain was going only to "report back", as the first stage in further discussions—as though he had not already given ample evidence that he would "report back" only after achieving his object. In those further negotiations "Czechoslovakia must clearly participate"—although Chamberlain had given ample proof already that his idea of Czechoslovak "participation" was that the British Minister or Lord Runciman should demand and that Czechoslovakia, threatened with desertion in face of the enemy, should yield. Only on such a basis might this personal meeting between Messrs. Chamberlain and Hitler "achieve memorable results", concluded the editorial—failing to warn the Labour movement, which had subscribed whole-heartedly to the Blackpool manifesto a week before, that no such basis as that manifesto demanded, and the editorial implied, existed.

This article has been described at such length because it was published at a crucial moment, when a public declaration of lack of confidence in Mr. Chamberlain, and a warning against his purpose in going to Berchtesgaden, would have completely changed the situation. In its actual form, it summed up all the peculiar features of the official Labour Party policy since March, and it pre-determined the complete impotence of Labour criticism thereafter. For whoever willed the Berchtesgaden meeting, knowing what was generally known of Chamberlain's policy, assumed a grave measure of responsibility for its result—the forcing of Czechoslovakia to give up its frontier districts: and thereby for Munich itself.

Thereafter, there was a conflict of policies visible in the leadership of the Labour Party; but for the time being it was of secondary importance.

It is not without interest that on September 17, while Cabinet discussions of Chamberlain's Berchtesgaden visit were in progress, Ambassador Kennedy cabled to Washington that "the Labor people up to now have played along very well, but Cadogan is not sure what will happen". Later that evening he met Sir Samuel Hoare—who had spent the last two and a half hours seeing editors, finishing with the *Daily Herald* and *News-Chronicle*, to have them "strong on the side of peace". Kennedy said: "He (Hoare) felt that the *Herald* would play ball" (*F.R.U.S.*, vol. I, pp. 608, 611).

On September 19, sure enough, a *Daily Herald* editorial, in the full Chamberlain vein, declared that negotiations must go on, and they must be based on reality. The Sudetens wanted secession, said the Labour paper, in defiance of facts. "In the past it has seemed that



two-thirds of the Sudetens are willing to follow Henlein's leadership"—an ambiguous statement which left out of account altogether the known circumstances of Nazi terror prevailing in the Sudeten districts. The Czechoslovak Government must be "realistic and courageous"—not, of course, in the sense of defending its independence and liberty by preparing to fight for the integrity of its territory, but by handing over the frontier districts to Hitler (was the implication).

When the Government announced that it was proposing those very terms that day, the National Joint Council of Labour issued a manifesto denouncing them ("the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia under the brutal threat of armed force by Nazi Germany") as a "shameful betrayal". But the only practical conclusion it drew from this, and from an expression of sympathy with the Czechs, was a demand for the "re-establishment of the rule of law". An accusation that the Premier had committed a shameful betrayal, which did not lead to the conclusion that the Labour leaders were prepared to join with anyone to get rid of its author, left matters exactly where they were. This was shown by the scant interest shown by Mr. Chamberlain in the Labour Party's demand next day that Parliament should be summoned (September 20).

On September 21 a joint meeting of the General Council of the Trades Union Congress, the Executive Committee of the Labour Party and the Executive Committee of the Parliamentary Labour Party, issued a second joint manifesto expressing their "profound humiliation" at the "shameful surrender" involved in the Anglo-French terms, which had been accepted that morning by the Czechoslovak Government. They represented a sacrifice of vital British interests, said the manifesto. The conclusions that it drew were: (i) an expression of sympathy with Czechoslovakia, (ii) the launching of a national campaign,<sup>4</sup> and (iii) the demand—apparently addressed to the Chamberlain Government which had carried through the terms denounced—that "the peace-loving nations must make an immediate and concerted effort to restore the rule of law". That this was no chance omission of a more forcible lead against the National Government, could be seen from the remark of the secretary of the Scottish Labour Party, at a conference of the Transport and General Workers' Union in Scotland, that "everyone welcomes the possibility of war being prevented by Mr. Chamberlain's visit to Hitler".

Then occurred Chamberlain's visit to Godesberg, and the unexpected hitch caused by the extensive character of the German demands

<sup>4</sup> The 3000 meetings of protest, mentioned earlier, were held this week-end.

presented to him there. The *Daily Herald*, in its editorial of September 24, announced that Chamberlain had been forced to adopt a firmer attitude than on the previous occasion. In what did this firmer attitude consist, in the view of the paper? In the fact that he was asking for no immediate invasion, but a peaceful transfer: it was impossible to conduct negotiations under the threat of force, still less to secure an ordered transfer.

But this was the very view which Chamberlain himself was urging upon Hitler at Godesberg. The distinction between his position and that of the official Labour Party organ had once again become infinitesimal. What had been a "shameful surrender" only three days before, in the view of the supreme authority of the British Labour movement, had now become a question involving merely the struggle for ordered transfer, instead of immediate invasion.

The point was driven home on the 27th. In an editorial, the newspaper threatened war *should Hitler invade Czechoslovakia*. He ought to accept the "sweeping offer of full satisfaction" made by the Czechs. The diplomatic correspondent was even more explicit in his echo of the Prime Minister's position. "All the territories Hitler claims he can have peaceably. But he insists on armed invasion." Thus the terms themselves had ceased to be a subject of dispute!

After further meetings of the National Joint Council of Labour on September 26 and 27, Mr. Attlee wrote to the Prime Minister, urging that Britain, France and the U.S.S.R. should stand together to resist any possible attack on Czechoslovakia. In this, too (in the absence of any demand to renounce the ultimatum to the Czechs of September 21, and return to the defence of Czechoslovakia's territorial integrity) the Labour leaders' position was no different from that taken up by the Foreign Office itself, in the statement given to the press on the evening of September 26.

When the Prime Minister, on September 28, announced in the House of Commons that he was leaving for Munich immediately, the Labour Party leaders once again hastened to give him a blank cheque. Mr. Attlee welcomed the Prime Minister's statement, saying that the Labour Party wished to give him every opportunity of following up this new move: "We agree to adjourn now, and hope that when the House reassembles the war clouds may have lifted", he said. Of any hint that the Government's policy was ensuring their return, there was no word. Mr. Maxton expressed the full agreement of the Independent Labour Party. Mr. Lansbury wished the Prime Minister "Godspeed", and said millions were grateful to him for his



initiative. The *Daily Herald*, in its editorial the next day, forgot all about the denunciation issued eight days before. It referred to the efforts of the British and French Governments "to secure a just and honourable peace". It was unfortunate that Russia and Czechoslovakia were not represented at Munich: but anything which enabled "negotiations for a reasonable settlement of differences" to continue was desirable. Thus what had been a matter of shame and dishonour a week before, was now just, reasonable and honourable, provided it could be achieved peaceably. That distinctive Labour policy which had come into view for a moment in the Blackpool resolution was now completely submerged, and in its place was adaptation of Labour's position to that of the Tory Government.

Nor was the editorial remarkable only in this. It declared that the German threat of war had "brought into being the close co-operation of Britain, France and Russia in defence of the principle of negotiation"—close co-operation which "must continue". We have seen that this picture, drawn for the readers of the *Daily Herald*, was completely false: no such co-operation existed, and to suggest that the U.S.S.R. was only interested in defending "the principle of negotiation" was closely akin to the manoeuvre of Georges Bonnet suggesting that the French Government had some kind of a "mandate to speak for the U.S.S.R." at Munich: and of Sir Samuel Hoare, who denied after Munich that Russia had been "cold-shouldered".

Not content with this, the *Daily Herald* published a further editorial on September 30—the day of the Munich settlement itself—plainly declaring that the principal concern must be to see that "the dismemberment is done decently and orderly". For good or ill, the Labour paper consoled its readers, it was now settled that the Sudeten districts would be transferred. The Czechs had agreed to this under irresistible pressure (we have seen already the contribution made by the *Daily Herald* itself to that pressure), and no section of British opinion had the right to be "more Czech than the Czechs". As if fearing that some section of British opinion might not be satisfied with this logic, the paper went on to declare that "to tell the Czechs now to go back on their words would be fair neither to them nor to anyone else".

Thus at the final moment of possible Czechoslovak resistance, while the army of the Czechoslovak Republic was still standing guard over its immense fortifications, and when the U.S.S.R. had made it clear that it would support resistance to the aggressor, the official organ of the British Labour Party sent out the message to the Czechoslovak

people that, if they rejected terms which had been forced on them by British and French pressure, it would not be "fair", i.e. that the British Labour movement, too, would not support them.

On October 1 and October 3, the British press was reporting that the Labour Party attitude towards the Munich settlement was still in doubt, and that the leaders were in a dilemma. Not so the *Daily Herald*. True, in its editorial of October 1, it advised its readers to suspend final judgment on Munich. But it proceeded nevertheless to advance the very arguments which subsequently were the basis of the Prime Minister's case in the Parliamentary debate on October 4—that Hitler had been forced to "abandon the most brutal terms", that the territory demanded was less than that required at Godesberg, that an international commission (and not Germany alone), would work out details, that it was an "enormously significant fact" that the German population had been cheering Mr. Chamberlain, and that in any case the Czechs had no option but to accept.

After this handsome endorsement in advance of Chamberlain's apologia, it is scarcely surprising that, so late as October 3, the Labour Party leaders were refusing to accept the proposition of a motion of censure on Mr. Chamberlain, and instead adopted a manifesto expressing the world's gratitude to the Czechoslovaks, and urging the provision of economic assistance, defence for their refugees, etc. In the debate which opened on October 4, the Labour amendment expressed relief that war had been averted, disapproved the policy which had led to the "sacrifice of Czechoslovakia" and merely demanded that Great Britain take the initiative in calling a world conference.

But if Beneš' notes in his diary for 1939 are to be trusted, the contradictions in the Labour Party leaders' policy were due to the fact that among them were people who definitely approved the Munich agreement, on the ground that England "was not yet ready or sufficiently united internally to undertake war against Hitlerite Germany" and that there might have been "a European war directed only against the Soviet Union". Thus (i) they accepted Chamberlain's argument that the alternative to the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia was war, (ii) they were more concerned about the Soviet Union than that country was itself—since it was prepared to help Czechoslovakia single-handed, if need be, (iii) they ruled out the possibility of Labour fighting against an anti-Soviet war. The leaders in question were, according to Beneš, Arthur Greenwood (Hon. Treasurer) and Arthur Henderson, jun.<sup>5</sup> Nor was this the only group which had accepted

<sup>5</sup> *Memoirs of Dr. Eduard Beneš* (English edn.), p. 99.

Munich beforehand. On August 27 the *New Statesman*, which had a considerable hold on the Labour Party's intellectuals, suddenly made itself (as on some other crucial occasions) the mouthpiece of Foreign Office influences. If a settlement (with Hitler's tools!) could not be reached on the basis of the historic frontiers, then "the question of frontier revision, difficult though it is, should at once be tackled. The strategical value of the Bohemian frontier should not be made the occasion of a world war. We should not guarantee the *status quo*." As yet we do not know whether this view (anticipating *The Times* editorial of September 7 by nearly a fortnight) was also reflected in the discussions of the Labour Party Executive.

The reader will judge for himself how far, in the light of the facts set forth, the Labour Party leaders were qualified to express their disapproval of a policy against which they did nothing to mobilise public opinion until the decisive moment—the Berchtesgaden Conference—had been passed: and then only with the reservations and contradictions described.

#### *In France*

The French Socialist Party, although in a stronger position than its British colleagues—since it was a constituent part of the Government majority—was not distinguished by any stronger policy; rather the contrary.

At the beginning of June its Congress at Royan, on the insistence of Léon Blum, the Socialist leader, adopted a resolution approving the foreign policy of the French Government.

When German army manoeuvres on the Czechoslovak and French frontiers—manœuvres heavily reinforced by big call-ups of reservists—were alarming all Europe in mid-August, Blum wrote soothingly:

"I believe that reflection and critical analysis of the facts lead to the dismissal of the hypothesis of a sudden act of aggression by Hitler against Czechoslovakia, even during the weeks when he will have ready in his hand an army whose exact strength is unknown. The most plausible conjecture is that Hitler is employing this menace to settle the Sudeten question peacefully, but nevertheless in his own way. The menace is suspended over France and England more than over Czechoslovakia. By making French and British opinion, which desire peace, aware of the war danger, Hitler reckons without doubt upon making London and Paris put a new turn of the screw upon

Prague. . . . Nevertheless I remain confident that neither London nor Paris will consent to be the instruments of Hitler's manœuvre."<sup>6</sup>

Rarely has confidence been so misplaced. But this did not change Blum's policy.

On the occasion of Chamberlain's flight to Berchtesgaden, Blum welcomed his "generous and courageous act", which was saluted by the "enthusiastic hope of pacific France". Should it fail, perhaps a "more distant and still higher intervention might take place".<sup>7</sup> On the following day, to silence ribald guesses as to whether M. Blum was referring to the Pope or to some supernatural power, he explained that he had in mind President Roosevelt.

When the generous and courageous act had produced what M. Blum then<sup>8</sup> called a "far from honourable settlement", all he could urge was that it must not be forced on Czechoslovakia. The next day, when he found that this very thing was being done, he expressed his regret that the French Government had not honoured its obligations. But he said that as a result "war has probably been averted", and admitted: "I feel myself divided between cowardly relief and shame." It must be emphasised that these articles, printed very prominently on the front page of the official Socialist newspaper, were the sole and authoritative voice of the French Socialist Party during these critical days (public meetings, in spite of the protests of the Communists, were prohibited).

On September 21, the day that the Anglo-French ultimatum was forced on the Czechs, the first of a series of characteristic incidents took place in the anterooms of the French Chamber. The Socialist M.P.s decided to demand the immediate recall of parliament, and passed a resolution saying they could not associate themselves with the diplomatic policy of the last few days. This meant the repudiation of Daladier's policy. At a meeting of the Left parties at 4 p.m., the Communists moved the dispatch of a delegation to Czechoslovakia, with an address of solidarity: a resolution in favour of maintaining the integrity of Czechoslovakia: a protest against the French Government's prohibition of public meetings: and a demand for the summoning of parliament. This series of proposals were a logical application of the Socialists' own decision. Yet when the Radical-Socialists moved the previous question, the Socialist delegates voted with them, and the Communist proposals were rejected by four to one!

That evening, Blum sadly recorded the fact that Czechoslovakia

<sup>6</sup> *Populaire*, August 17, 1938 (quoted by Werth, *op. cit.*, p. 26).

<sup>7</sup> *Populaire*, September 17, 1938.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, September 19, 1938.



had "yielded to its cruel destiny".<sup>9</sup> The Socialist Party, he said the next day, was asking parliament to reassemble, but "puts itself above all ministerial intrigue"—in other words, had no intention of pressing for Daladier's overthrow on account of a policy which it had first repudiated and then tacitly endorsed: since that policy was "cruel destiny". But there was still a danger that Hitler might attack Czechoslovakia, he wrote on the 24th, and then the Pacts would operate: he therefore appealed to President Roosevelt, "the greatest authority in the temporal world", to intervene. To intervene, that is, not in order to preserve the integrity of Czechoslovakia, but to prevent its dismemberment by war when this could be done in peace.

This became amply clear the same evening, at another meeting of the Left parties. Daladier had told a delegation of the Radical-Socialists that the French pacts of mutual assistance would certainly function if Czechoslovakia were attacked, but (as mentioned earlier) refused to specify whether he meant Czechoslovakia in her old frontiers, or in those determined by the Anglo-French ultimatum. Knowing this, the Socialists nevertheless voted with the Radical-Socialists and the independent groups, against a Communist proposal to repudiate the Berchtesgaden terms and to demand the summoning of parliament immediately!

Blum explained why, in a further article.<sup>10</sup> Britain and France had imposed the abandonment of Sudeten territory. "The fact is accomplished. God himself, as a philosopher has said, can change nothing in the past." The philosopher still feared that some untimely action by Hitler might precipitate war, and he again pressed President Roosevelt to intervene. "The portion of the dispute still existing between Germany and Czechoslovakia can and must be regulated by an honourable and equitable agreement", said Blum<sup>11</sup>—referring, of course, to the question of whether Czechoslovakia should be dismembered hastily or in tranquil deliberation.

It is hardly surprising, after the foregoing, that Mr. Chamberlain's announcement aroused in Blum "an immense movement of joy and hope", and to break off negotiations or render them impossible—i.e. to announce that Czechoslovakia would not accept dismemberment—would in his eyes have been "a criminal error against humanity". Reason could not conceive or tolerate that an honourable and equitable settlement was impossible on what Blum called—no doubt inadvertently—"the methods of execution", once agreement had been

<sup>9</sup> *Populaire*, September 22, 1938.

<sup>10</sup> *Populaire*, September 26, 1938.

<sup>11</sup> *Populaire*, September 27, 1938.

received on principles. And, in a final lyrical outburst, Blum wrote<sup>12</sup> that the Munich meeting was "an armful of twigs cast on the sacred hearth, at the moment when the flame was dying".

This was no chance excess. On October 1, the *Populaire* proclaimed, in large letters: "International Détente. Munich Agreement Accepted by Czechoslovakia. Pathetic Appeal of General Syrový. Daladier Warmly Acclaimed by Large Crowd on Arrival in Paris." And Blum himself, in a leading article, asserted that no man or woman in France would refuse Chamberlain and Daladier a "just tribute of gratitude". War had been avoided. The flail was departing. Life again was becoming natural, concluded Blum, in a scarcely pardonable forgetfulness of Czechoslovakia, Spain, China, the "Axis" and *Mein Kampf*.

The Seine Federation of the Socialist Party issued a placard the same day, announcing that peace was saved, and that a nightmare which weighed down millions of human beings had been "eliminated". The Socialist M.P.s, by a unanimous vote, expressed their rejoicing likewise, and announced that they "await from the Entente of peaceable Powers measures for consolidating peace and settling all problems which affect it". The Socialist Youth of the Seine Department rejoiced at the Munich settlement "which permits European governments to address themselves seriously to the organisation of peace and disarmament, and the peaceful revision of treaties".<sup>13</sup>

Two months later, the nightmare was once again present, the Deputies were still waiting, and European governments were not doing that which the Socialist youth organisation had permitted them to do. But the hundreds of thousands of French citizens who followed the call of the Socialist Party had been very effectively rallied in support of Daladier and Munich, at a critical turning point in European history. In order to make assurance doubly sure, the Socialist Party organisation began mobilising the opinion of its membership, and the pages of *Populaire* during the following days were filled with resolutions of the controlling bodies of Socialist district Federations, and of trade unions favourable to the Socialist leaders' viewpoint, expressing their homage to Messrs. Chamberlain and Daladier, explaining that liberty cannot be won by the force of bayonets, denouncing attempts to set up "two ideological blocs", and in other ways ranging public opinion, to the best of their ability, on the side of the Munich settlement and its authors.

It is interesting that, at a session of the Young Socialist International

<sup>12</sup> *Populaire*, September 29, 1938.

<sup>13</sup> *Populaire*, October 2, 1938.

held about this time, the French Young Socialists found themselves in effective isolation when they denounced "ideological crusades" as an argument for defending the Munich settlement.

In view of this campaign, it was only natural that, when parliament reassembled on October 4, the Socialist Party joined the Government majority of 543 in voting approval of Munich. If similar incidents had not been recorded earlier, it would be less easy to understand why the Socialist M.P.s first decided, at midnight, by 97 to 43, to vote against the Government on the question of full powers to issue financial decrees, and then, at 2 a.m., decided to abstain when Daladier promised, through the medium of Herriot, to limit the period of full-powers to November 15, and to call parliament again in mid-November.<sup>14</sup> M. Daladier did not call parliament for another three weeks after the promised date, and managed in the interim to provoke the one-day General Strike on November 30 which gave him the opportunity for a vast display of military force against Frenchmen, such as he had not thought possible to use in defence of France's allies in September.

In the governing bodies of the General Confederation of Labour, a temporary alliance between Socialists, Syndicalists, Pacifists and Trotskyists succeeded all through the crisis in preventing the publication of any statement, on behalf of the five million trade unionists of France, in denunciation of the policy of the French Government or of the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. This, even more than the policy of the Socialists alone, ensured the absence of any effective challenge to Daladier within the ranks of the Popular Front. The quite special significance of the attitude of the C.G.T. leadership can be seen when, on examining the respective industrial pages of the Socialist *Populaire* and the Communist *Humanité*, we find that the "Munichite" policy of the majority of the C.G.T. leaders was supported by the executives of such unions as the clothing workers, the clerks, the tobacco and match workers, the pharmacists, the hat workers, the teachers, the maritime officers: with only the miners as representatives of the unions in the basic industries of the country. The minority were supported by the executives of the great productive unions—metallurgical workers, engineers, aircraft workers, textile workers, chemical workers, transport workers, and so on.

Reviewing the activity of the leaders and controlling bodies of the Labour Party in Great Britain and the Socialist Party in France, during the period of preparation for the transfer of the Czechoslovak

<sup>14</sup> *Temps*, October 6, 1938.

fortifications to Hitler, we therefore find that in neither country did the Labour leaders attempt to arouse public opinion against that transfer. On the contrary, even where they did not welcome the dictated settlement which embodied it, they facilitated (each in their own way) the successive steps by which that settlement was reached.



## CHAPTER XI

## THE PEOPLES AND CZECHOSLOVAKIA

"LOOK, Mother," said a girl on an historic occasion. "Everyone's out of step but our Jock!" The reader may perhaps have recalled the story, and have gained the impression that there was none but the U.S.S.R. ready to go to the help of the Czechoslovak people. Such an impression would be mistaken. What is true, however, is that for several months the mass of the people in Britain and France were, as usual, bewildered and left without leadership. They were deprived of the means of expressing, in any very tangible form, their sympathy with the people of Czechoslovakia. It was only gradually—towards the end of the summer of 1938—that they began to find the means. The subject would repay further research. But there is much already available.

In Great Britain, within the official bodies of the Labour movement itself, there were many in September who took a radically different line from that of their leaders. Two million votes were cast at the Co-operative Party conference for the policy of a United Peace Alliance. Such appeals as that of Miss Ellen Wilkinson, M.P., at a gigantic demonstration in Trafalgar Square to "fight against Chamberlain, the friend of Fascism at home" (September 18); of Mr. D. N. Pritt, K.C., M.P., that the Government had been acting "not from folly or cowardice, but because it hates Socialism"; of Colonel Wedgwood, M.P., at Peterborough, that the Prime Minister "must be against democracy and for tyranny, otherwise surely he would have called on Russia, on America, and on the people and Parliament of this land"; of Lord Strabolgi at Crayford that "Hitler would be stopped now if we turned Chamberlain out, mobilised, stood by France, Russia and Czechoslovakia and said the limit was reached"; of Mr. Emanuel Shinwell, M.P., at Seaham, that an emergency seemed to have arisen which justified joint action by the Labour Party with other progressive forces, against the Government (September 25)—these and similar declarations of well-known Labour leaders could be paralleled by the appeals and speeches of many local active members of the Labour Party, of which one heard at the time, but which were

recorded only in local newspapers, branch or trades council minutes, and the like.

Another distinguishing feature of the resistance to a policy of capitulation in Great Britain, particularly during the months of August and September, was that it began to be felt very soon outside the framework of the Labour Party. Within the Conservative ranks, Winston Churchill drew attention to the real nature of Hitler's policy, to the inevitable effect of a policy of perpetual conciliation without regard to circumstances, and to the need for an explicit agreement and military consultations between Great Britain, France, and the U.S.S.R., if a forcible repartitioning of the world in the interests of the aggressors were not to begin with Czechoslovakia. Especially after the Godesberg visit, letters poured into the offices of Conservative newspapers like the *Daily Telegraph*, *Times* and *Yorkshire Post*, many of them published, demanding that a stand be made against Hitler. If nevertheless there were others in the Conservative Party who did not venture so openly to criticise their Government's policy before Munich, events afterwards showed that they were quite numerous, and it was only hesitancy about the possibility of finding allies that held them back.

The majority of the Liberal Party rank and file rapidly recovered from the enthusiasm which had led its leaders in Parliament, on September 14, to join in the applause for the Prime Minister's announcement of his visit to Berchtesgaden. Thus, the *Manchester Guardian* on September 22 reported that, upon a consideration of the Berchtesgaden terms, the General Committee of the Manchester Liberal Federation had unanimously resolved to demand the immediate summoning of Parliament and the resignation of the Government. On September 27 the Liberal leader, Sir Archibald Sinclair, M.P., sent a message to the French Radical-Socialists urging upon them the immediate initiation of diplomatic and staff talks between Britain, France and the U.S.S.R. In the case of the Liberals, also, there were scores of local spokesmen whose protests against the policy which led to Munich can be found recorded in the columns of local newspapers, but were not reflected in the news printed by the national press.

Among the leaders of trade unionism, departure from official policy was less noticeable in Great Britain than in France, before the middle of September. Immediately the Berchtesgaden terms became known in their broad outline, however, the Executive Council of the South Wales Miners' Federation sent a telegram to the National Council of Labour, calling upon the latter to repudiate "this betrayal", and urging

demonstrations and meetings against it. Before Chamberlain left for Munich, Mr. J. Marchbank, the General Secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen, wrote in the *Railway Review*: "I am more than ever convinced that the turn of events last week marked the culmination of Britain's present rulers' efforts to evade the implications and obligations of Soviet Russia's alliance with France and Czechoslovakia" (this was the day before the *Daily Herald* assured its readers that there was "close co-operation" between Britain, France and the U.S.S.R.). Marchbank went on to express the hope that Labour's voice in Parliament would be "clear and strong", demanding the reversal of "the Government's policy of betrayal and retreat" and urging a firm alliance with countries prepared to resist aggression, including the U.S.S.R. In the upshot, as has been seen, Labour's voice in Parliament was heard instead encouraging Chamberlain to go to Munich.

In France, on the other hand, where a number of important industrial unions were led by Communists and their supporters, a far greater volume of trade union denunciation of the Berchtesgaden terms made itself felt. Faced with the Government's prohibition of public meetings on foreign affairs, the trade unions of the Seine, with 1,250,000 workers in their ranks, organised on September 23 hundreds of meetings within the factory gates, which passed resolutions demanding solidarity with Czechoslovakia, and sent innumerable representatives to the Czechoslovak Legation with assurances of their support. The executive committee of the metallurgical workers' union—to take but one out of many examples—passed a resolution by a large majority on September 24, denouncing the Anglo-French terms to Czechoslovakia as a betrayal, demanding their repudiation and a meeting of all the Powers interested in maintaining peace against the aggressor, and insisting on the arrest of those responsible for spreading defeatist propaganda in France. Significant, too, of the difference between the mood of the workers and that of the Socialist leaders and of the majority in the governing body of the C.G.T., was the announcement on September 30 that the aircraft workers, who had agreed to work on Saturday, October 1, as a mark of their readiness to defend security and democracy, refused this extra day on learning of the Munich conference, "in view of the useless and dangerous capitulations before the Fascist policy of intimidation".

In Great Britain there was a large volume of protest not merely against the terms imposed on Czechoslovakia, but against the continued existence of the government responsible for the terms, on the

part of local organisations, primarily those of the working class but in great number also of other sections of the people. It would be vain, however, to look for traces of this protest in the majority of the London newspapers. The few score resolutions which were noted by the Left press themselves represent but a small proportion of those which were passed all over the country, as could be verified on reference to trade union journals, local newspapers and the archives of Labour organisations.

The following are typical examples. The 1/362 (Watford) branch of the Transport and General Workers' Union sent a resolution to the Prime Minister demanding that Britain should join with France and the U.S.S.R. in preserving the integrity of Czechoslovakia: further concessions to Hitler only led to further demands on his part. "We would remind you that one million Britishers died in the 1914-18 war to prevent this, and we regard the attitude of the National Government towards the Fascist Powers of Germany and Italy as a direct betrayal of the dead and of democracy."

In Birmingham a meeting of shop stewards of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, representing 11,000 skilled men in the factories of that important city, passed a resolution calling on all democratic people "to repudiate this vile betrayal of democracy" by Mr. Chamberlain, whose association with Hitler revealed "his pro-Fascist policy". The resolution called for a powerful movement to force the resignation of the Government.

The Sheffield Trades and Labour Council passed a resolution denouncing the Anglo-French terms and demanding the immediate recall of Parliament. Similar demands were adopted by hundreds of trade union branches, peace councils and local Labour organisations.

The Shop Stewards' Committee at the DeHavilland Aircraft Company (Edgware), decided to send a letter to the metal workers' union in Prague, stating that the 1500 organised workers represented by the committee were "aghast at the gross betrayal of the democratic and peace-loving people of Czechoslovakia by the Chamberlain Government". The committee also sent a delegate to No. 10 Downing Street with a letter to the Prime Minister, protesting against the Anglo-French terms.

One characteristic demand which runs through a very large number of the resolutions adopted by these organisations—for a campaign to drive from office the "National" Government—was the very conclusion which, as has been noted earlier, was *not* drawn by the responsible authorities of the Labour movement even from their most bitter



criticism of the Government's action. Among the varied bodies which passed such resolutions, in addition to those mentioned, were the London Central Committee of the Electrical Trades Union (representing 25,000 workers), a very large meeting of London printing workers at the Memorial Hall, a deputation to No. 10 Downing Street representing all sections of the 1500 building workers engaged on the new Air Ministry building in Berkeley Square, an immense demonstration—the largest since the General Strike of 1926—in the Yorkshire mining centre of Barnsley, the Sheffield branch of the National Union of Railwaymen, and the Ogmere and Garw Urban District Council (South Wales).

An equally representative list could be made of the activity in all parts of the country of people and organisations which normally refrained from active intervention in political affairs. The Cambridge Peace Council, for example, with the support of a great number of local organisations, convened a large meeting at which it presented a resolution declaring that the Anglo-French plan, "far from being a peace plan, is a proposal which increases the danger of war in the future, by giving yet further sanction to aggression". It called for an international guarantee of support for Czechoslovak territorial integrity. In Glasgow, a university professor took part in chalking the streets with protests against the concessions to Germany. The University Labour Federation, on behalf of 3000 students, wrote to the Prime Minister demanding that he should approach the Governments of France, the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. with a view to concerting defence of Czechoslovakia and the principles of collective security.

Perhaps more significant of the greater political activity of the middle classes in Great Britain was the remarkable part played in the crisis by the Left Book Clubs. Nothing could be more expressive of the situation which prevailed in Great Britain during September, 1938, when the three largest political parties represented in Parliament were either actively or passively co-operating in the Government's policy of secret connivance with Hitler, and when as a consequence public opinion was at one stroke, as it were, deprived of its usual sounding-boards of expression. The trade union and Labour organisations appealed primarily to the working class, and in actual fact—apart from the mass meetings which were held at particular moments—had the active services of only a minority of their members attending branch meetings. The Communist Party could not, with its 16,000 members, command the attention of many sections of middle-class opinion. In this situation the 1000 local Left Book Club groups with

their 50,000 members of whom the overwhelming majority were non-Communist (though many Communists were active in the L.B.C.), and certainly a majority were people in more comfortable circumstances than those of the industrial workers, played a unique part. Their leaflet explaining the inner meaning of the crisis over Czechoslovakia, and calling for action to overthrow the National Government, was distributed in 2,500,000 copies, mainly among people who were not ordinarily reached by the organisations mentioned earlier; their reproductions of the leaflet, as two-column advertisements in the leading London newspapers, fulfilled the same purpose. The distribution of the leaflets in very many cases led to the holding of successful mass meetings, either under the auspices of the Left Book Club or jointly with other organisations. Meetings were held in such typical areas for the middle strata of society as Torquay, Bournemouth, Hampstead, Taunton, as well as in more industrial centres like Accrington, Liverpool, Leeds. It is hardly to be questioned that the immense demonstrations which were held in Whitehall, at the height of the crisis, found much of their inspiration in the work of the members of the Left Book Club.

The Communist Parties in France and Great Britain had long been warning the public of the tendency to sacrifice Czechoslovakia in the interests of what the British and French Governments considered appeasement.

On March 26, 1938, the British Communist Party commented on Chamberlain's rejection of the Soviet proposals of March 17: "Faced as we are with a Fascist war alliance which is busily engaged in seizing strategic points for a swoop on European democracy and peace, Chamberlain's policy can only be regarded as a deliberate encouragement to Hitler to annex the great steel industry and arsenals of Czechoslovakia, to add to the essential war materials which Fascism has grabbed in Austria and Spain."

Two days after the Czechoslovak mobilisation, the Communist Party on May 23 called the pressure imposed by Chamberlain on Czechoslovakia "one of the most shameful episodes in British history". Does anyone believe that Hitler or Henlein are really concerned with the unity of German-speaking people? "Not at all! The aims of Hitler and Henlein are directed at making Czechoslovakia a vassal State of Germany, to break its peace pact with France and the Soviet Union and clear the way for Hitler's war aims in Europe as a whole. These aims, summed up, are the conquest of Europe, and that means Britain as well as Czechoslovakia and France, as well as

the Balkan countries and the Soviet Union." Czechoslovakia was "a long way off"—it had "a foreign-sounding name which the Rothermeres and the Beaverbrooks, the Chamberlains and the Mosleys are not slow to play upon". But its fate would determine the future of the British people. The United Peace Alliance, an emergency conference of the Labour Party "which has been so insistently demanded during past weeks by Labour and trade union organisations throughout the country", were essential.

"Britain, united with democratic France, Spain, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, could easily put a stop to German and Italian Fascist aggression", said a further statement on May 30.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the pronouncements of the Communist Parties read later like inspired prophecies. Such, for example, was the statement in the Paris *Humanité* of July 24, that Mr. Chamberlain's policy aimed at detaching the Sudeten districts from Czechoslovakia, the reduction of the Czechoslovak army to the status of a police force, the nullification of the Czechoslovak pacts with France and the U.S.S.R., and the provision of a Four-Power guarantee—by Germany, Italy, France and Great Britain—for Czechoslovakia in its truncated form. The French Communist Party's manifesto after the Anglo-French terms of September 19 were adopted declared: "Obeying the orders of Hitler, Chamberlain has secured the agreement of the British and French Ministers to the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, the integrity of which is inseparable from the security of France and the peace of Europe. . . . The Daladier Government have agreed to this new surrender to international Fascism. After this, Hitler will be able to demand French colonies and Alsace-Lorraine, while Mussolini will ask for Tunisia, Corsica, Nice and Savoy." Almost, too, like a draft of Mr. Chamberlain's last-minute message to Hitler on September 28, reads the sarcastic remark of the diplomatic correspondent of the *Daily Worker*, on August 26: "If Hitler will kindly consent to avoid an armed attack for a few weeks more, the British Government will throw its whole weight into trying to extract from the Czechs by diplomatic pressure everything that Hitler demands."

In an equally striking example of the Communist reading of the situation, at the Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain at Birmingham, immediately after the Berchtesgaden meeting (but before the Anglo-French terms had been forced on Czechoslovakia), one of the Party leaders, R. P. Dutt, said:

<sup>1</sup> Report of the Central Committee, Communist Party of Great Britain, to the 15th Party Congress (September 16-19, 1938), pp. 121, 129-32, 134.

"No one who has followed the events of the past week can fail to see that the Government has been deliberately encouraging a certain war atmosphere, an atmosphere similar to that of 1914. The war crisis is real enough. The Government is playing a double game in this. It is using the war crisis to stage a deception, in order to build up the strength of Chamberlain in Britain. They are spreading everywhere a picture that the issue of war is the issue, that to-morrow we may find Britain, France and the Soviet Union at war with Germany. That is the picture being put in the minds of the people. Speculation spreads as to what we will do then, and has also affected members of our Party. Why is the Government concerned to spread this? Is it because they intend to make such a united stand? That is the last thing they mean to do if they can help it. It is the last thing Hitler wants to put himself up against. If there were such a united stand, that would not mean war but peace. But their aim is on this basis to smash the idea of the peace front, by associating it in the minds of the people with war. Their aim is on this basis to put across their policy of breaking the peace front, betraying Czechoslovakia, betraying peace, and to put it across in such a way that it is received as a triumph for peace, that Chamberlain is the saviour of peace."

Harry Pollitt, in his report to the Congress as General Secretary, also stressed that Chamberlain's Government, in surrendering strategic positions to the Fascist State, was waiting for the moment "when the vigilance of the people has been lulled, and its hopes of detaching France from her allies have succeeded". Then Hitler would be told he could strike. The Government hoped ultimately to turn the Fascist advance against the Soviet Union: but in reality, by turning Britain's back on the peace bloc, "Chamberlain is leading Britain into war". But unless a united mass movement forced changes now in Government policy, "Britain will be isolated in her hour of need".<sup>2</sup>

The French and British Communists, in their press and their leaflets (in Britain at public meetings) drew the conclusion that all those who wished for collective resistance to the attack on Czechoslovak independence and integrity should combine their forces, irrespective of party affiliation, in a national effort to substitute, for the governments of Chamberlain and Daladier, other governments pledged to co-operate with each other and with the U.S.S.R. in the formation of a "peace bloc" of Powers. Thus—to take one moment out of a chain

<sup>2</sup> H. Pollitt, *Selected Articles and Speeches*, vol. II (1954), pp. 65-7.



of events—the Communist Party of Great Britain on September 23 (the day of the “hitch” at Godesberg) sent letters to the leaders of the Liberal and Labour parties, pressing for joint action against the National Government in defence of Czechoslovakia; while the following day the *Temps* was recording in shocked terms the fact that the Communist leader, Péri, was, in a leading article in *Humanité*, “demanding at these grave hours the overthrow of the Government”. Again: “This is not just a question of the betrayal of Czechoslovakia, it is not a question of the betrayal of peace. It is the betrayal of Britain. . . . The National Government are not isolating Soviet Russia. They are isolating Britain,” said W. Gallacher, the British Communist M.P., in the Parliamentary debate on October 4. “Up to the dictated peace of Munich, one could believe that the Czechoslovak barrier, guarding the road to the Balkans, would also protect if necessary the breast of France. That barrier has been overthrown. You have destroyed at that same moment the confidence of the peoples in France; you have demonstrated to the world that it was dangerous to be a friend of France. . . . You have signed defeat on the mutilated body of a free people; it is against you that we shall win the victory of peace”, said Gabriel Péri, the French Communist Party’s spokesman, in the Chamber on October 5.

But would the peoples have followed a policy in line with these appeals from opponents of the policy of Chamberlain and Daladier? In answering this question, one must reckon perforce with the fact that their audience was a limited one, whether we think of Churchill or of the *Daily Worker*. The ordinary sounding-board of Parliament was closed in both countries throughout the height of the crisis; the vast majority of the newspapers, privately owned, was equally closed except for letters from correspondents accustomed to putting their thoughts on paper; it was an open secret in Fleet Street that Chamberlain was putting personal pressure on their editors; in France public meetings on foreign policy were prohibited, in Great Britain the same leaders who were urging Chamberlain to convene Parliament would not convene a special conference of their own party. Bearing in mind, therefore, that the opponents of Government policy could only reach a small part of their respective nations, and that part frequently more by accident than by plan, one must consider it extremely significant that, on September 18, the International Peace Campaign succeeded in assembling one of the most gigantic demonstrations ever seen, up to that time, in Trafalgar Square. On September 21 the largest meeting seen for many years was held in Manchester to protest against the

Anglo-French terms. On September 23 many thousands of Paris factory workers marched to the Czechoslovak Legation, as mass deputations, with addresses of solidarity. Starting with September 18, when the Trafalgar Square demonstration was followed by thousands of people thronging into Whitehall crying: “Stand by the Czechs!”, the demonstrations in Whitehall and in Downing Street itself grew almost nightly, until on the 26th tens of thousands were passing slowly past the seat of government of the British Empire, with such cries as “Stand by the Czechs! Concessions mean war! Chamberlain must go!”

It would be a great mistake to imagine that those who took part in these demonstrations were convinced followers of the Labour Party, the Communist Party or any other political organisation. For the most part they were the same Londoners and Parisians who, in 1934, had marched in their hundreds of thousands in the campaign against the French Fascist leader De la Rocque, in February, and his British counterpart Sir Oswald Mosley in September. Nor could the dockers at King’s Lynn who, on September 27, refused to load a cargo of one hundred tons of pig-iron on a German ship bound for Hamburg be thought particularly grounded in “advanced politics”, for which their town had not been specially or outstandingly noted. These actions and expressions of opinion must be taken as characteristic of that section of the people who, for one reason or another, had been driven to think about the case against the policy of “appeasement”. In a broader way, the readiness and calmness with which the great mass of the people responded, in all countries directly affected, when the possibility arose of an armed conflict—the rush to enlist, and of the “lower classes” to enrol in the A.R.P. organisation, in Great Britain: the willing answer of the mobilised reservists, in France: the vast number of volunteers who enrolled at the Czechoslovak Legation in Yugoslavia: among similar volunteers, the divisional general of the Rumanian army who offered his services to Czechoslovakia: and other similar signs—which have been recorded earlier—showed the instinctive popular appreciation that the issues involved in the negotiations with Hitler, and bound up with the fate of Czechoslovakia, went deeper than could be solved by a personal meeting between the British Prime Minister and the Führer. As Alexander Werth wrote: “The French people were in reality far better than either their press or their politicians.”<sup>3</sup> Of the British people it was not only Churchill who observed that they “never flinched” in the days before Munich.<sup>4</sup>

The peoples would have supported collective resistance to the

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 231.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 256.

aggressor, not primarily because of democratic Czechoslovakia, but because they felt that continual co-operation with the aggressor "axis" had brought the world to the point at which the establishment of German domination began. This was the lesson of the fragmentary and partial expressions of opinion which political, police, financial and property restrictions allowed to the mass of the people during the critical days of September, 1938. This, measured in heads or votes, might seem only a repetition of similar demonstrations of feeling, even larger in character—for example, the Peace Ballot in England in 1935, in which over 11,000,000 people declared for collective security: or the great Popular Front demonstrations in France in 1935-6, in which millions participated. But qualitatively the repetition of such demonstrations in the circumstances of September, 1938, meant something much greater, because they came when war had been brought nearer. The questions of who was responsible and what was the way out had become matters of life and death for millions of people.

## CHAPTER XII

## THE DEFENCE OF MUNICH

A NUMBER of arguments were put forward after Munich (some of them as late as 1944)<sup>1</sup> to justify the decisions taken there. Answering them will serve to recapitulate much of the evidence in previous chapters.

## I

One was the assertion that the Sudeten Germans wanted to "join the Reich . . . a natural development in the circumstances",<sup>2</sup> and that the British people would not have supported a war to prevent them doing so;<sup>3</sup> or, in the words of Mr. H. Ramsbotham, M.P., the British Minister of Pensions on October 31, that "we should have been fighting to prevent some 3,500,000 Germans living on the borders between Germany and Czechoslovakia from joining their own kith and kin".

One reply is, of course, the historical fact that the Germans of Hitler's Reich were not the kith and kin of the Sudeten Germans, who were a mixed population of German and Czech origin—including great numbers of Czechs (as their names show) Germanised under the Austro-Hungarian régime before the war. Their ancestors in the Middle Ages had been part of the Holy Roman Empire: they and their forebears for 300 years had been the subjects of Austria. Moreover, the demand for transfer to Germany was never put forward by Henlein himself<sup>4</sup> until September 15, when it was already clear that Mr. Chamberlain not only favoured this, but was prepared to facilitate the annexation, provided it was done by "peaceful" methods.

This reminds us of the real reply to the talk about kith and kin: that it had nothing at all to do with the case. The fact that there were German-speaking citizens of Czechoslovakia was—as has been shown

<sup>1</sup> W. W. Hadley, *Munich: Before and After* (London, 1944), and Viscount Maugham, *The Truth About the Munich Crisis* (London, 1944).

<sup>2</sup> Lord Runciman in his final report to Mr. Chamberlain, September 21, 1938 (*D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 675 *et seqq.*).

<sup>3</sup> Neville Chamberlain in the House of Commons, October 6, 1938.

<sup>4</sup> Accounts of the quarrels between German and Czech bourgeois nationalists can be found (in English) in R. W. Seton-Watson, *A History of the Czechs and Slovaks*, 1943, Chapters 13, 16 and 17.



from the secret documents of the Nazis themselves—merely a convenient pretext for disrupting from within, dismembering and ultimately annexing the Czechoslovak Republic. At Munich itself some 380,000 Germans were left within the borders of mutilated Czechoslovakia, to provide the necessary means of still further disrupting the country. Moreover, about 720,000 Czechs were annexed to Germany at Munich—"overlooked" by its apologists, and immediately subjected to atrocious ill-treatment by the Nazis, such as the "Sudeten Germans" had never experienced.<sup>5</sup>

As for what the people of the annexed districts thought, there is the eloquent testimony of the special correspondents of *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post*, whose messages were printed in those newspapers on October 3 and 4. People of all classes told them that they had worked for autonomy, not for annexation: they seemed "almost stunned" and their principal feeling was one of "bewilderment and uneasiness". A big manufacturer who had voted for Henlein told the correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post*: "Never was the question of our annexation by Germany put before us, and we would never have voted for it. In all the confidential conferences of German industrialists . . . we never considered for a moment the possibility of the destruction of our thousand years' common life with the Czechoslovaks." The same was the testimony of a German-speaking reservist of the Czechoslovak army, who, with all his family, had voted for Henlein "because we believed that he would help us to get more employment". Only "half-grown lads" were rejoicing at the announcement of annexation to Germany.

It was significant, too, that the first instinct of tens of thousands of Sudeten Germans on hearing the news was to escape into Bohemia—where they were turned back by the Czech police and troops, under orders from the Czech General Syrový; who had served as the agent of the British and French invaders of Soviet Russia in 1918, was appointed Premier under false pretence of organising resistance on September 22, 1938, and now had turned Nazi agent.<sup>6</sup> It is equally pertinent to remark that the first act of the German "kith and kin" was to flood the area with Gestapo, Black Guards and Storm Troopers from Germany, who carried out a mass "clean-up" of the area with the indispensable atrocities against Jews, active trade unionists, Socialists and Communists, and established at least three concentration camps.

<sup>5</sup> Ripka, *op. cit.*, pp. 269-70. Societies were dissolved: 80 per cent. of their schools closed down: shopkeepers forced out of business, and of course political terror raged.

<sup>6</sup> A speaking likeness of this man is given by Wheeler-Bennett, *op. cit.*, pp. 198-9. In 1947 he was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment as a collaborator.

## 2

Another argument, also put forward by Neville Chamberlain in the Parliamentary debate, was that the terms secured at Munich represented an improvement on Hitler's original demands, laid down at Godesberg. The *Daily Herald* had supported this in advance, on September 15, declaring that Hitler "has had to abandon the most brutal of his Godesberg terms".

This plea does not bear closer examination. True, the area was occupied by the German army, under the Munich settlement, in ten days instead of in one: but this only meant that the German army was enabled peacefully to occupy the area, instead of having to fight, as would certainly have been the case had it attempted occupation in one day. So much was clear from the Czechoslovak flat rejection of the Godesberg terms, and from the mood of the army itself. But in all other essentials the outcome of Munich and the demands of Godesberg proved as like as two peas.

Thus, the territorial arrangements, instead of being "dictated", were to be made by an international commission—said the apologists. In reality, as shown in preceding chapters, the Germans simply dictated to the so-called "international commission", which never functioned as such at all. In territory, as a result, the settlement in some respects was actually worse than that provided under the Godesberg terms, as the diplomatic correspondent of the pro-Munich *Times* itself admitted. The right of option of the Sudeten Germans, of which a great deal was made at the time of Munich—that they could choose themselves whether to remain Czechoslovak citizens or to become Germans—was denied them. Helpless after the loss of its fortifications and the subsequent internal political changes forced upon it by Germany, "Czecho-Slovakia"<sup>7</sup> was forced also to sign an agreement giving up this right of option for the German-speaking population of the Sudeten districts, and actually declaring the German-speaking refugees themselves for the most part to be German citizens, whose surrender could be demanded by the German Government. Thirdly, one outrageous feature of the map presented to Chamberlain at Godesberg—a German corridor running right across Czechoslovak territory to connect Austria with south-eastern Germany, and dividing Czech Bohemia from the other territories—reappeared after the signature of the Munich settlement, in the shape of an agreement "voluntarily"

<sup>7</sup> As the Republic was now called, reflecting the aid given by the Nazis to the Slovak Fascists in disrupting it *after* Munich.

signed by Czechoslovakia with Germany (November 19, 1938) for the construction of an extra-territorial German motor road across its territory. Much was made of Hitler's having "dropped" the demand for a plebiscite in certain predominantly Czech areas. In reality, he annexed these areas *without* plebiscite—either immediately, or by "agreement", or (finally) when he felt ready to annex the whole territory of the Republic, on March 15, 1939.

## 3

A further argument was that Munich provided Czechoslovakia with something much more valuable than the pledges of security contained in its pacts with France and the U.S.S.R.—namely, an international guarantee. "I myself believe that the international guarantee in which we have taken part will more than compensate for the loss of the strategic frontier", announced Sir Samuel Hoare in Parliament on October 3, 1938. The Government felt under "a moral obligation to treat the guarantee as being now in force", added his Cabinet colleague, Sir Thomas Inskip, next day. On October 5, with what might almost be called a touch of buffoonery, Sir John Simon expressed the hope that Russia would join the guarantee!

It is hardly probable that within one month of Munich there were many among the supporters of Messrs. Chamberlain and Daladier who wished to talk very much about this "wholly discreditable" guarantee.<sup>8</sup>

The proceedings of the International Commission set up in Berlin to work out the details of the application of the Munich settlement—or the Ambassadors' Conference, as it was in fact—proved conclusively the futility of a guarantee by Powers unable in any way to resist any German demand which might be put forward. Furthermore, the guarantor Powers were unable to intervene when Hungary and Poland extorted further territorial concessions, over and above what had been provided at Munich. When they were making preparations for an attack on Ruthenia (Trans-Carpathian Ukraine), with the object of dividing it between them and thus establishing a common frontier, it was not the guarantor Powers who intervened successfully, but the new German "protector" of Czechoslovakia. And when Germany began to press the mutilated Czechoslovakia to renounce the

<sup>8</sup> The Conservative constitutional historian, Professor A. Berriedale Keith, who uses this expression, adds that Chamberlain and Daladier "were acting like financiers who guarantee sums they know they cannot pay, on the speculative chance that things will so work out that they will never be confronted with the need of action. . . . While financiers may disregard their own honour, Prime Ministers have to remember that the honour of their countries should not be pledged without all reasonable certainty that any undertaking shall be made good" (*The Causes of the War, 1940*, pp. 378-9).

system of guarantees altogether, Britain and France showed by their silence that here, too, they were impotent.

Indeed, the essential futility of the "international guarantee" was that it could not be implemented by Britain and France, should Germany decide to attack Czechoslovakia, once the latter's barrier of fortifications had been taken from her—except in conditions infinitely more unfavourable than those which were held to justify the Munich settlement. And in fact by December it was clear to Coulondre, the French Ambassador in Berlin (newly transferred from Moscow), that the "vassalisation" of Czechoslovakia was now almost complete, while at the German Foreign Office, when he raised the question of the guarantees, Weizsäcker replied: "Couldn't that business be forgotten? It is regarded without any sympathy here."<sup>9</sup>

## 4

A fourth argument frequently put forward after Munich was that it was better for Czechoslovakia to yield the territories concerned (the bearing of this surrender on the future of Czechoslovak independence and democracy was not unduly stressed) rather than be "destroyed by a war". "The only alternative to this plan would be an invasion and a dismemberment of the country by force, and Czechoslovakia, though a conflict might arise which would lead to incalculable loss of life, *could not be reconstituted in her frontiers whatever the result of the conflict may be*", was the double threat cabled from London on September 27.<sup>10</sup> The Czechs should make the best terms they could with Berlin, otherwise "we shall be exposing Czechoslovakia to the same fate as Abyssinia", the thoughtful Sir Neville Henderson cabled to London the same day.<sup>11</sup> However great the injustice of Munich (echoed the *Manchester Guardian* on October 1, but one of many), "they cannot be measured against the horrors that might have extinguished not only Czecho-Slovakia, but the whole of Western civilisation".

There are serious grounds for believing, as has been seen earlier, that a firm front of the Great Powers in support of Czechoslovak territorial integrity would have acted as a serious deterrent to Germany. Moreover, as has been pointed out, Hitler's army and air force were by no means as strong as they were twelve months later. But even assuming that, through some unwise precipitation or irrevocable commitment, Hitler had begun a war against Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union alone, it does not follow that the alternative

<sup>9</sup> Coulondre, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-9. <sup>10</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 572-3. <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 562.



to fighting was destruction. Serbia and Belgium were not destroyed in the first world war, although they suffered the loss of almost their entire territory in the course of military operations, and in the case of Serbia even greater trials and miseries for the common people. Spain, deprived at one blow of almost its entire army, and subject to an invasion organised by two well-equipped Great Powers, was not destroyed, but on the contrary, in spite of terrible losses, made immense strides towards overcoming the heritage of age-long economic and social backwardness, in the course of the war itself. There was no foreign observer of the spirit of the Chinese people, during the most unequal period of the struggle against the well-armed Japanese invading armies, who did not testify that, in that struggle, the Chinese people achieved a degree of national unity and heroic resistance unequalled in their history.

Nor were these considerations foreign to general opinion in Czechoslovakia, as could have been found had it been consulted (which doubtless was the very reason why, after Munich as after Berchtesgaden, the representatives of the British and French Governments would not allow the necessary time for submitting the proposed terms to the Czechoslovak Parliament). Two and a half months after Munich, an English economist and publicist who never erred in excessive desire to embarrass Mr. Chamberlain—Sir Walter (later Lord) Layton—wrote in the *News Chronicle*,<sup>12</sup> after a visit to Prague:

“The Czechs are convinced almost to a man that they ought to have fought in September. They might have suffered the fate of Serbia in 1914, and have been driven back for a time into Slovakia, Ruthenia—even into Rumania. But Germany was not in a condition to fight a prolonged war. It is doubtful if she would have fought at all, and if she had done so she would certainly have collapsed before very long. Such is the view of the man in the street.”

Such also was the view of the main leaders of the army in private, even though they refused to fight side by side with the U.S.S.R. for political reasons. And the implication of the contrary argument must be clearly understood. It was that there should be no resistance by a small power to a large aggressive State, since in such a contest, even though the small State might be supported by those much stronger than itself, the small State usually had to bear the brunt of the first attack, which as a general rule it was least able to withstand. As Gamelin had said, “everything will be settled by the Peace Treaty”. In this

<sup>12</sup> December 14, 1938.

particular case, the small State was exceptionally well equipped for resistance; but the implication remains the same. And it led directly to the admission that the aggressor, particularly when he had formed an offensive and defensive alliance with other aggressors, should be yielded world hegemony without a struggle.

5

A further argument was contained in the famous remark of Mr. Chamberlain, in his broadcast on September 27, that this was “a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing”. Most of the people of the Dominions, “like the great majority of the people in this country”, had never heard of Czechoslovakia, and it was very difficult to see how they were concerned “in so remote a matter”, recalls Viscount Maugham, Lord Chancellor in Chamberlain’s Government in 1938.

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that, in view of the far greater interest taken by the general public in foreign affairs after the first world war, the much greater space devoted by the newspapers to foreign politics, and the very much more frequent debates on foreign policy in the House of Commons (a circumstance which Mr. Chamberlain frequently deplored), a much larger section of the British people did know something about Czechoslovakia in 1938, and had made up its mind about her, than in 1914 had known anything about Serbia, or was moved by the question of Belgian neutrality. As for France, it is sufficient to remember the Franco-Czechoslovak treaties. The proof that for the peoples the issue was by no means a remote one has already been given, in the preceding chapter. Of course, it is certain that both Chamberlain and Daladier, by the methods of negotiation which they pursued in 1938, and by keeping their parliaments in recess for months, did their best to see that their peoples should know as little as possible.

There is a further point to this argument, however. Mr. Chamberlain had more than once made it clear that the plea of remoteness and ignorance would not be valid when territory belonging to the British Empire was attacked (for example, Singapore, hardly a subject of extensive knowledge among the mass of the British people), or if someone attacked a client of Great Britain, as Egypt was then, or Irak—although not in any of these cases were the conditions of the people made well known in Great Britain (and with good reason). The horrors of war would not restrain Mr. Chamberlain where British

interests or British-controlled territory were at stake. "Any suggestion that we might offer to surrender some portion of the British Empire in order to buy Hitler off was indignantly rejected", wrote Lord Cecil sarcastically.<sup>13</sup> To concentrate attention on the remoteness of the country, therefore, in the case of Czechoslovakia was a politician's trick, all very well in an election speech, but dishonourable in an international crisis.

## 6

Then there is the assertion that the Munich agreement was in no sense "exclusive", that it was intended as the stepping-stone to wider conciliation, and that in particular the only reason why the U.S.S.R. was not invited to Munich—although at least as interested in the fate of Czechoslovakia as the Italian Government—was Hitler's prejudices and the pressing character of the emergency, and did not in any sense mean a desire to exclude the U.S.S.R. from international consultations. Sir Samuel Hoare on October 3 even misled the House of Commons into imagining that there had been regular contact with the U.S.S.R. before Munich, by saying that in consultations with the Soviet Government, Britain had "naturally" let France take the lead, since it was on her action that Soviet support of Czechoslovakia depended (a statement false in itself, as has been shown). The composition of the Munich meeting (said Lord Halifax in the House of Lords) did not mean "any weakening of the desire on our part . . . to *preserve* our understanding and relations with the Soviet Government"—a masterpiece of deceptive insinuation (the italics are ours).

It required a truly brazen front, in any case, to go so obviously against the plain facts obvious to all the world—facts which led Potemkin on October 4, 1938, to tell the French Ambassador: "The Western Powers deliberately excluded the U.S.S.R. from the negotiations."<sup>14</sup>

For in an earlier chapter it has been shown that the failure to invite the U.S.S.R. to Munich was *not* an isolated or unexpected event, but the last stage of a deliberate policy almost openly pursued throughout the months since March.<sup>15</sup> It may be perfectly true that Hitler was

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 317.

<sup>14</sup> Coulondre, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>15</sup> On July 14 the German Ambassador in London, commenting on the British Government's "low opinion" of the U.S.S.R., said that its treatment of Kagan, the Soviet representative in the Non-Intervention Committee (of which Lord Plymouth, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, was Chairman), was a further sign of the desire "to exclude Soviet Russia from any discussion on a European settlement" (*D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 486).

in no mood for meeting a Soviet representative on September 29, 1938—particularly as the U.S.S.R. had plainly announced that it would fight, if Czechoslovakia did. But there was no reason for him to be in any other mood, in view of the very obvious avoidance by the British and French Governments themselves, during the preceding months, of any serious discussions on this subject, and of any association at all, with Soviet representatives. Indeed, we now have direct evidence that the Germans understood this very well. As early as July 10, 1938, the German Ambassador in London was reporting<sup>16</sup> that Chamberlain's Cabinet had "come nearer to understanding the most essential points of the major demands advanced by Germany, with respect to excluding the Soviet Union from the decision of the destinies of Europe. . . ." From the morning after the Munich conference (Robert Coulondre wrote from Berlin in a survey of six months' German policy, on March 19, 1939), it was clear that "beyond the Rhine the agreements signed were interpreted as meaning for Germany freedom of action in central and eastern Europe with, as a corollary, the relative abandonment of interest in these regions by the western Powers".<sup>17</sup>

Here again the proof of the pudding was in the eating. During the months that immediately followed the Munich Conference, apart from profuse verbal assurances by British Ministers in the House of Commons of their desire to keep in close contact with the U.S.S.R., there was no evidence whatsoever that that desire existed in fact. A number of important occasions were allowed to pass without the slightest attempt being made to establish such contact—contact which was obviously called for, had the assurances been serious.

Thus the King's Speech at the opening of a new session of the British Parliament, soon after Munich, very demonstratively omitted any reference to the U.S.S.R., either in friendship or otherwise. The same applies to the speech of the Government spokesman who wound up the debate in the House of Commons. The same is true also of the French Government's statement to the Chamber of Deputies, and to the latter's Foreign Affairs Committee, in December, 1938 (we shall see why, in a later chapter). And it is noteworthy that, while the Western Governments arranged and sponsored a series of diplomatic visits between their capitals and those of the aggressor States—Berlin and Rome—there was at no time during this period any suggestion of such a visit, or even of a frank exchange of views on policy in a

<sup>16</sup> *D. & M.*, vol. I, p. 132.

<sup>17</sup> *Documents Diplomatiques, 1938-1939* (French Yellow Book, 1939), p. 87.



meeting between leading statesmen, where the U.S.S.R. was concerned.

Even when Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union were simultaneously involved in serious disputes with Japan in the spring of 1939—the first two on account of commercial interests in China, the third on account of commercial and political relations with Japan: and all three in consequence of the boundless truculence of the Japanese in asserting a claim to overlordship in Eastern Asia—the British Government organised contact and parallel action only with the United States, not with the U.S.S.R.

Thus the promises not to attempt to exclude the U.S.S.R. from international consultations in future were only in the nature of polite assurances, intended to cloak a very different policy, rather than serious expressions of the British Government's intentions.

## 7

One further argument, of a very special character, is worth notice—not so much because it was put forward originally by some ultra-“revolutionary” and Trotskyist journalists, but because the idea had already been taken up before Munich by a certain number of pacifists, who wanted to provide a thoroughly up-to-date justification of non-resistance suited to modern conditions.

This was as follows: the quarrel over Czechoslovakia was of no interest to the working classes, or to the mass of the people, since it was a quarrel about a capitalist State, and between two rival imperialist groups—the Franco-British and the German-Italian. Lenin, these new-found disciples of the great Russian revolutionary declared, had insisted in 1914 that the workers should turn such a war into a civil war, and that they should not let themselves be butchered to safeguard the investments of their masters.

This argument might have been more impressive—although not less misleading—had it proceeded from persons who accepted the other teachings of Lenin inseparably bound up with his views on war. But quite apart from this, their belated application of the lessons of the world war of 1914-18 to the situation of 1938 overlooked several important differences. One was that, even in 1914, Lenin and the Bolsheviks, as indeed the international Socialist movement before them, had always determined the character of a war by the character of the social order in the State waging it, and by the policy of its ruling class. Consequently they distinguished between a war for markets, raw materials and cheap labour, such as two rival imperialist groups

might wage, and a war which arose on account of the aggression of an imperialist country against a country less advanced on the capitalist road—such as a colony, or even an independent capitalist country which, for economic and social reasons, had not become a fully imperialist State. In either of these cases, although the victim of aggression was not a Socialist State by any means, its self-defence would be progressive from the point of view of the working class. Since the ultimate enemy of the working class also was imperialism, it was bound to see a possible ally in a colonial people, defending its right of independent existence or in the people of an independent capitalist State, defending itself against transformation into the colonial appendage of some imperialist Power.

Of course, some imperialist group might support the weaker party in such a war for its own selfish purpose. In that case there might be an interweaving of *two* types of war—a just war of national self-defence, and an imperialist conflict—to which the answer could not be one of sheer abstentionism, unless the workers frankly adopted the attitude that it was wrong to kill at all.

But in present circumstances there were two additional factors which did not exist in 1914.

The first was Fascism—the most ruthless, retrogressive, barbarous and desperate form of government ever adopted by capitalism. Even pillars of capitalist society who regarded Marxist ideas with abhorrence—Conservative leaders, archbishops, bankers—were forced to admit that Fascism throws humanity back to the dark ages, and destroys gradually all the positive achievements of subsequent stages of civilisation. The working classes, whose philosophy—to the extent that they have achieved one of their own—includes appreciation of the positive achievements of successive historical epochs, could not ignore this distinction between Fascism and capitalist democracy. They could not, therefore, deny that the fight in defence of even a bourgeois (capitalist) democracy against Fascism, whether conducted within national boundaries or against the international aggression of a Fascist State, was a progressive fight requiring their support. Sufficient has been said earlier to show that, with all its defects and with all its limitations from the point of view of the working class, Czechoslovakia before Munich was such a bourgeois democracy; and its defence against the supreme exponents of aggressive Fascism, Hitler and his allies, was a progressive fight.

The second factor which did not exist in 1914 was the U.S.S.R. If it supported Czechoslovakia, or was prepared to enter into a peace

bloc with capitalist States, as it had been for a number of years, this was not because it sought colonies, more raw materials or cheap labour—an absurdity for a country constituted on the basis of social ownership of the means of production like the U.S.S.R.—but precisely because it distinguished between those States whose interest lay in war for a new redivision of the world, and those who for their own purpose wanted to preserve peace, and whose interests therefore—for very different reasons—coincided on this question with those of the common people of all countries. Moreover, for the working class there was more than a theoretical interest in the U.S.S.R. actively participating either in international political action to defend Czechoslovakia, or if need be in military action. For in either case the presence of the U.S.S.R. meant that purely imperialist designs could not be pursued with freedom, were the allies of Czechoslovakia ever so selfish or treacherous in the purposes for which they were opposing Germany.

That, no doubt, after the experience of the years from 1933 onwards, was the very reason why the self-styled friends of Czechoslovakia were evidently determined from the very beginning to keep the Soviet Union out of international consultations: and particularly kept it out of Munich, which might have been “unsuccessful”—as a peaceful carving-up of Czechoslovakia—had the Soviet Union been present. But the particular pacifists and ultra-“revolutionaries” were not concerned about that.

## 8

Another argument abandoned all pretence of altruism and lofty purpose, and said that “Britain and France were not ready, and dare not risk a fight”. The French were inferior in planes and tanks, anti-aircraft guns and anti-tank guns: this has been the constant defence of all the apologists for Munich since the war, from Bonnet to Maugham. The British could only offer the French, in mid-September, two divisions and 150 aeroplanes: “What could France do?” asks Bonnet (not mentioning that he had systematically rejected the support of scores of Soviet divisions and thousands of Soviet aeroplanes).

It must be replied, in the first place, that in spite of these admitted (and well-exploited) deficiencies, if a war—contrary to probability—really did begin, the odds were overwhelmingly against Germany, as shown in Chapter IX.

A land attack on Czechoslovakia at Germany’s then level of strength could have been held up for weeks by the Czechoslovak army: the Germans themselves thought so. Not only was the Germany of

September, 1938, much weaker than she was a year later: industrialised Czechoslovakia was far stronger than agrarian, squire-ridden Poland in 1939. It is relevant to recall that an artillery officer of the German army, employed as an instructor at a German military academy, told a *Reuter* correspondent on October 7 that “even the German army, aided by constant pounding of heavy artillery and supported by tanks, would have found these forts impregnable”. An air attack would have been met immediately by the numerically inferior but strong Czechoslovak air force (which was within a very short flying distance of important German industrial centres), and almost immediately would have met with a destructive counter-attack from the much stronger air forces of Czechoslovakia’s Eastern ally. The danger to Germany in this respect would have left comparatively small resources available for air attacks in the West. It could not be seriously alleged that the line of Western fortifications hastily constructed by the Germans after 1936 would have presented anything like the obstacles to an invasion of Germany which the Maginot Line presented to an invasion of France by the then forces of Germany. Over and above these considerations, there would have been the immediate effect of a British naval blockade, and, before a very few days were out, the effect of the arrival on the scene of the Soviet land forces.

The immensely greater economic potential of the countries opposing Germany would come increasingly into play as time went on.

But the most extraordinary thing about this argument from weakness is that *it was thrown aside more than once by the very people who used it*. How did it come about that Chamberlain, in his anonymous statement to lobby correspondents on September 11, could so far forget all the talk about Anglo-French impotence as to tell Germany that “she cannot with impunity carry out a rapid and successful military campaign against Czechoslovakia without the fear of intervention by France and even Great Britain”? How was it that he and Daladier on September 23 could withdraw their disapproval of Czechoslovak general mobilisation, which was supposed to be terribly provocative? How was it that he and Lord Halifax could agree to issue the famous Foreign Office communiqué of September 26, threatening that “Great Britain and Russia will certainly stand by France”? It was because all of them, like the grossly anti-Czech Henderson on August 6, knew that Hitler would not dare to make war if they “showed their teeth”.

Indeed, all this was made quite obvious by several important members of the British Government within a short time after Munich. The Minister for Co-ordination of Defence said at Gravesend on



October 13: "We are ready to defend British interests, British liberty and British territory against any invader or against any aggressor. . . . There was nothing unready about the Air Force, small though it was, and I say that in efficiency and courage our Air Force has no equal in the world." The Home Secretary, in his speech at Cambridge, already quoted, declared that he was there that night definitely and expressly to contradict the charge that Mr. Chamberlain had "capitulated" at Munich because British defence forces were too weak to resist. He said: "Let no one suppose that because we published to the world our own deficiencies, we were the only great country that did not possess a navy, an army and an air force ready to the last button to take the field. If other countries had welcomed public criticism as we welcomed it, it would have been found that there was not a navy, army or air force in the world that had not gaps in its organisation and deficiencies in its personnel. Our programme was incomplete and, as we had publicly stated the general lines of our expansion, there was no secret about its incompleteness. Yet for all its incompleteness, our rearmament had reached a stage at which we should have shown ourselves unshakeable in the early days of a war, and irresistible as the war progressed."

Even the Prime Minister himself found it necessary to declare, in a speech in the City of London on December 15, 1938: "We may take it that when German statesmen—I will not say the German people—reflect upon the possible consequences of conflict, if ever conflict should arise between our two countries, they think not only of our armaments but of our great financial resources, which in a war of long duration might well prove to be the deciding factor."

This reply, from the author and champion of the Munich agreement, may well be considered conclusive by those who advanced the argument from weakness. The fact is that the argument was turned on and off, as required, like a water-tap.

## 9

But the grand and prime argument was that all Europe had been saved from war. Any other policy would have been a gamble with "preventive war", said Sir Terence O'Connor, the Solicitor-General, on October 12, 1938. "We should have been gambling with the lives of 50,000,000 people", declared the Minister of Pensions, in his speech on October 31. *The Times* wrote, on the morning after Munich: "It is as certain as can be that war, incalculable in its range, would have broken out against the wishes of every people concerned." And nearly

twenty years later Lord Halifax wrote: "The only possible defence of Munich, which was the genuine defence, was that it was a horrible and wretched business, but the lesser of two evils."<sup>18</sup>

This was not the first time that such an argument had been used. It was used to justify the non-intervention scheme, against the protests of the Spanish Republic and the Soviet Union, during the German and Italian invasion which began in 1936. The remarkable fact was, however, that when, in defiance of all the sophistries used a few months before, the French Government, supported by the British, gave Germany warning in January, 1937, that it would take military action in Morocco unless German fortifications and batteries were removed from that portion which was under the control of the Spanish rebel Franco, there was no world war, and Germany—for the time being, at least—desisted. Similarly, some months later, when the ravages of Italian submarines were threatening the vital communications of Great Britain and France in the Mediterranean, the international conference was rapidly summoned at Nyon, in September, under conditions similar in all essentials to those which prevailed a year before, and the governments concerned, led by Britain, France and the U.S.S.R., decided on drastic measures which were directed, and could only be directed, against Italy. Yet there was no war. The "unknown submarines" disappeared from the Mediterranean trade routes.

There had been a still more striking disproof of the argument that to present a firm front to the aggressor meant gambling with the risk of a general war. From October, 1936, the Soviet Union was helping the Spanish Republic. It did so in the teeth of violent protests by Britain and France. If its help to Spain had involved it in an attack by the Fascist "axis"—particularly by Germany and Japan—no one could seriously believe that either the British or French Government would raise a finger at that time. The Fascist Powers were actively assisting the Spanish rebels, and their artillerymen and aviators were frequently in action against "Red" material. Yet the Fascist "axis" did not dare, under these most favourable conditions, to attack the U.S.S.R.—obviously because it knew it was not strong enough to do so. Obviously, therefore, it would have been still less inclined to attack a combination of the U.S.S.R. and Spain with Great Britain and France, not to speak of other allies who were then available. Yet Mr. Chamberlain and the members of his Cabinet continued, month after month, to assert that any firm front against the invaders of Spain involved the terrible risk of a general war.

<sup>18</sup> Halifax, *Fulness of Days*, p. 198.

The truth was, of course, that the danger of war did not lie in resisting the aggressor, but on the contrary in co-operating with him. For from that he derived encouragement, and his allies also. If two such Great Powers as Britain and France could not intervene to save the keystone of any collective security on the European continent, their own vital interests being at stake, the aggressor might well form the impression that they could do nothing effective to stop him henceforth. The Munich agreement from this viewpoint did not avert war, but rather made a possible (and largely problematical) war more certain in the future. For those interests which both the British and the French Empires might consider to be vital, and therefore worth defending, were so far-flung, that an aggressor who felt that he had a free hand would be bound to come into conflict with them somewhere, sooner or later.

## 10

With this argument usually went yet another—that, as the *Daily Mail* wrote on October 1, Chamberlain had “laid the foundation of lasting peace in Europe”. On October 12, 1938, the Minister for Co-ordination of Defence explained that the influence of peace was “infectious”. At last they had “got on the road to friendly relations with that great nation, Germany”. “After Munich he had been persuaded that fifty years of world peace were now assured”, Lord Halifax informed the German Ambassador in London on August 9, 1939.<sup>19</sup>

In the next chapter an attempt will be made to trace the international consequences of Munich. This should provide some material for judging whether these professed hopes were justified, or whether the “infectiousness” of the peace concluded at Munich was understood by Hitler in a different sense from that in which Sir Thomas Inskip’s audience understood it. “The fact of Munich was a stepping-stone to further aggression”, a United States prosecuting attorney was to say at the Nuremberg trials, seventeen years after the Munich Conference.<sup>20</sup>

However, within a few weeks of Munich itself there were signs that those who bore primary responsibility for it were beginning to have doubts as to whether the Munich arrangements were working quite as they themselves had intended.

At Cambridge on November 25, Sir Samuel Hoare, the Home Secretary, stated that “in recent days there have been setbacks in the

<sup>19</sup> *D. & M.*, vol. II, p. 128.

<sup>20</sup> *Trial*, part II, p. 24.

course of European appeasement. I am afraid that we must be prepared for setbacks.” So also with Lord Zetland, Secretary for India and Burma, who declared in a speech at Torquay on November 18: “I had hoped that the Conference at Munich marked the opening of a new chapter of human history. I am obliged to confess that my hope has been rudely shaken.” He admitted that it had “become clear” at Munich that what Germany wanted in Czechoslovakia was a strategic and not a racial frontier.

So also the President of the Board of Education, Lord de la Warr, speaking at Bradford on December 4, declared that “there was a deep and growing feeling that there was nothing that we could do that could satisfy them, that friendly words and friendly actions were mistaken for cowardice, and that only armaments could speak effectively”.

And the Prime Minister himself, addressing the Foreign Press Association in London on December 13, found it necessary to say that the checks, disappointments and setbacks he had received had come “perhaps in greater measure than I had anticipated”. Of course, he was not disheartened or deterred thereby in his defence of Munich—even though he was speaking to an audience from which the representatives of his partner at Munich, the German Ambassador and the German journalists, had demonstratively absented themselves. But even so, Mr. Chamberlain was forced to express his regret that the German press, controlled from top to bottom by Dr. Goebbels, “in few cases shows any sign of a desire to understand our point of view”. Nor was the Prime Minister content to confine himself to these plaintive comments. Justifying the expansion of British armaments after the Munich agreement, he declared: “While I hope we shall always be ready to discuss in a reasonable spirit any grievances or any injustices that may be alleged to exist, it is to reason that we are prepared to listen, and not to force.” The overwhelming majority of his audience applauded this statement very loudly, because the diplomats representing many small States, the British and foreign diplomatic journalists assembled for the occasion, and the numerous British public men who were also present, understood very well whom this warning would reach, whatever were the intentions of the Prime Minister.

Thus it would seem that whatever had proved infectious at Munich, it was not the influence of peace, and that the prospects of fifty years of peace in Europe, within three months of Munich, were not so certain—at any rate in the sense which Lord Halifax had expected. But what was that sense?



## PART THREE

# CONCLUSIONS

### CHAPTER XIII

#### WHY DID THEY DO IT?

EVEN if there were no documents to demonstrate the contrary, it cannot seriously be contended that what was obvious to British and French diplomats on the spot, to special correspondents and political journalists, to military men of experience and to their secret agents, was hidden from the Ministers governing Britain and France in 1938.

They knew very well, from diplomatic dispatches and other reports, that the whole "Sudeten German" agitation was a purposeful swindle engineered from Berlin, and that the mass of German-speaking citizens of Czechoslovakia, whatever grievances they had, had no desire to be forced under the bloody tyranny of Hitler's Reich instead of getting their grievances remedied in Czechoslovakia. The British and French Governments, whatever they told their respective publics, knew perfectly well that the Munich terms were no better than those of Godesberg, and their own precious "international guarantee" not worth the paper it was written on—except to tide them over a difficult moment in face of public opinion. They were well aware that they *had* excluded the U.S.S.R., and that—if they had put all the facts before their peoples—no one would have cried out that Czechoslovakia was "a far-away country", with a people "of whom we know nothing". They did not require generals to tell them that, even if Czechoslovakia were partly ravaged in the first onset of war, that would not decide its outcome: and that, however great their deficiencies in armaments, the real balance of strength in 1938, if they called in the U.S.S.R. soon enough, would be overwhelmingly on their side<sup>1</sup> before ever a question of war arose, and probably would

<sup>1</sup> "It would not be correct to say that our military weakness was the principal cause of the Munich agreement", wrote one of its chief architects, Sir Samuel Hoare (Lord Templewood), in his memoirs, *Nine Troubled Years* (1945), p. 289.

prevent it. Nor were they so uninformed—for then they would have been almost alone in their respective countries—as to be ignorant of the step-by-step tactics of conquest pursued by Hitler, in applying the policy of *Mein Kampf*, or of the possibilities opened to him, both in Eastern and Western Europe, if Czechoslovakia were destroyed.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, they were well aware that, in the literal sense, peace would be more, not less, threatened by Munich.

No one who takes the trouble to read either the diplomatic documents or the memoirs of the time—or even some competent account of how the machinery of government works in Britain and France—could have the slightest illusion about the foregoing. Chamberlain, Daladier and their associates could only have been blind to these things if they wanted to be blind.

Therefore the real question is, *why* did they want to be blind? *In what sense* did they hope that peace was strengthened by Munich? Or let us put it in another way. The excuses and apologies they made after the event are not important: all these men were politicians, trained up and well versed in a system which puts a premium on promising one thing at elections and doing another after winning them. To look at what they said in public, while carrying out their operation on the flesh of the Czechoslovak people, would be as helpful as listening to the cheap-jack's patter in the market, instead of looking at the goods he is selling. But what did they really have in mind, in doing what they did between March and September, 1938?

In trying to answer this question, we should take into account one remarkable circumstance. On all sides, during these fatal months, responsible people were telling each other how dangerous it was for them to go to war, because the Soviet Union and Communism would be likely to win it.

On April 30, 1938, Bonnet told Welczeck, the German Ambassador in Paris, that in the event of world war "all Europe would perish, and both victor and vanquished would fall victims to world Communism".<sup>3</sup> On May 10 the same opinion was conveyed to Welczeck by Paul Reynaud, Minister of Justice and Bonnet's colleague: war would be a catastrophe "from which Europe would never recover, with the possible exception of Russia, remote and already living under Communism".<sup>4</sup> On May 22 it was Daladier's turn. War, he told

<sup>2</sup> Take, for example, Daladier's remark on September 25 that Hitler's aim was clearly "to destroy Czechoslovakia by force, enslaving her, and afterwards effecting the domination of Europe" (*D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 527).

<sup>3</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 254.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

Welczeck, "would mean the utter destruction of European civilisation. Into the battle zones, devastated and denuded of men, Cossack and Mongol hordes would pour, bringing to Europe a new 'culture'." This must be prevented, even if it entailed great sacrifices."<sup>5</sup> On the same day, in Berlin, Neville Henderson was conveying to Ribbentrop the same terrifying information: he couldn't guarantee that Great Britain would stand aside if Germany used forcible measures—and "only those will benefit from such a catastrophe who wish to see the destruction of European civilisation".<sup>6</sup>

The idea was not entirely novel to the Germans: but on June 20, in a memorandum presented to Ribbentrop by Weizsäcker, warning him against a policy which would bring Britain and France into war with Germany too soon, we read again that "the common loser with us would be the whole of Europe, the victors chiefly the non-European continents and the anti-social powers".<sup>7</sup> However, the French Ambassador in Moscow joined in the lecturing some time in August. Expressing the hope that there would be no Franco-German conflict, "you know as well as I do for whom we are working if we come to blows", Coulondre told von der Schulenburg.<sup>8</sup> The next day, in Prague, Beneš was telling the Henleinite leaders that "he was only afraid of two things, a war and, after it, a Bolshevik revolution".<sup>9</sup> And the complete unity of Germany's actual and possible opponents on this point was again underlined for her rulers the next day again (August 25), when a cable from the German Legation in Prague informed them that the Secretary of the British Legation, in conversation with both journalists and diplomats, was declaring: "If it came to war between Germany, France and Britain, the only ones to benefit would be the Soviets."<sup>10</sup>

Endlessly, the terrible tidings went round in ever-larger circles. On September 2 it was the turn of the United States Ambassador in Paris. As we have seen earlier, Bullitt on that day told Sir Eric Phipps, the British Ambassador, that after provoking "a general conflagration", Russia would rise "like a phoenix, but out of all our ashes", in order to bring about "a world revolution".<sup>11</sup> On September 6 the Rumanian Foreign Minister, Comnen, insisted to the Germans that world war would be unavoidable if there were armed conflict between them

<sup>5</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 327.

<sup>6</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. I, p. 341 (Lord Perth, in Rome, gave the same warning to Ciano that evening).

<sup>7</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 420.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 631.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 641.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 656-7.

<sup>11</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 219.



and Czechoslovakia, and that "the sole beneficiaries of a conflict would be Bolshevism and international Jewry".<sup>12</sup> Next day it was Daladier once again rubbing it into the German *Chargé d'Affaires*: "After the end of a war, the outbreak of a revolution, irrespective of victor or vanquished, was as certain in France as in Germany and Italy. Soviet Russia would not let the opportunity pass of bringing world revolution to our lands after the weakening of the European continent."<sup>13</sup> Nor were the Germans idle. On September 11 the German military attaché in Paris, Kühlenthal, said to General Gamelin: "When Germany and France are prostrate, Russia, who will have stood aside, will intervene and it will be universal revolution."<sup>14</sup>

These opinions were shared in the United States. On September 25, as described in the note to Chapter VII, the German *Chargé d'Affaires* in Washington cabled about the "pronounced antipathy" of the leading authorities in the U.S. Army towards the Soviet Union, whom they believed to be "attempting to incite the Powers against one another so as to promote Communism".<sup>15</sup> Nor was this feeling confined to the Pentagon. Roosevelt's first message to Hitler, in more veiled yet unmistakable terms, warned him that if there were war, "the social structure of every country involved may be completely wrecked". And in later conversation with Beneš—as the latter revealed many years afterwards—Roosevelt confirmed that these had been his feelings: "I realised that he was also aware of the universal social crisis which would inevitably spring from a new war."<sup>16</sup>

Such was the chorus rising on all sides. Each was trying to frighten the other—the Anglo-French camp, in order to persuade the Germans to accept Czechoslovakia peacefully in stages, so to speak: the German camp, in order to keep Anglo-French pressure on the Czechoslovak Government up to the mark: the Americans, evidently, to reinforce their argument, addressed to both sides, that the Chamberlain way was the best.

Now of course it was perfectly obvious that another world war would precipitate a deepening of the profound crisis in the capitalist system ushered in by the outbreak of the first world war in 1914. This was no diplomatic secret. Stalin had publicly reminded the world of it on several occasions. "Every time the contradictions of capitalism become acute," he said, in his political report on behalf of the Central Committee, to the 16th Congress of the Communist Party of the

<sup>12</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 701.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 713.

<sup>14</sup> Gamelin, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

<sup>15</sup> *D.G.F.P.*, vol. II, p. 922.

<sup>16</sup> Beneš, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-80.

Soviet Union,<sup>17</sup> "the bourgeoisie turns its gaze towards the U.S.S.R., and asks whether it would not be possible to solve this or that contradiction of capitalism, or all the contradictions together, at the expense of the U.S.S.R. . . . But intervention is a two-edged sword. The bourgeoisie knows this perfectly well. It will be all right, it thinks, if intervention goes off smoothly and ends in the defeat of the U.S.S.R. But what if it ends in the defeat of the capitalists? There has been intervention once and it ended in failure. If the first intervention, when the Bolsheviks were weak, ended in failure, what guarantee is there that the second will not end in failure? Everybody sees that the Bolsheviks are very much stronger now." More recently, on January 26, 1934, Stalin had returned to the question more forcibly and in greater detail.<sup>18</sup>

If the German bourgeoisie launched a new war, now that Fascism was in the saddle, he said, "it is sure to unleash revolution and jeopardise the very existence of capitalism in a number of countries, as was the case in the course of the first imperialist war. . . . What guarantee is there that the second imperialist war will produce 'better' results for them than the first? Would it not be more correct to assume that the opposite will be the case?" As for war against the U.S.S.R., such a war would be "the most dangerous war" for the bourgeoisie which started it. "And let not Messieurs the bourgeoisie blame us if some of the governments so near and dear to them, which to-day rule happily 'by the grace of God', are missing on the morrow of such a war. . . . It can hardly be doubted that a second war against the U.S.S.R. will lead to the complete defeat of the aggressors, to revolution in a number of countries in Europe and in Asia, and to the destruction of the bourgeois-landlord governments in these countries."

But if this was the universally agreed prospect, and if—as was obvious from the experience of the years 1933-8, and still more of the months from March to September, 1938—the ambitions of the Nazi leaders in a revived imperialist Germany were creating the threat of a new world war which must bring revolution in its train, why encourage them? Why not prevent war? Why not enlist the support of the Soviet Union in putting it off? These questions were all the more reasonable because Stalin at no time and in no way was extolling the virtues of war. On the contrary. In the very same speech of January, 1934, which had become known throughout the world, Stalin had said that, without having "to sing the praises of the Versailles Treaty, we merely do not agree to the world being flung into

<sup>17</sup> June 27, 1930 (*Works*, vol. XII, pp. 262-3).

<sup>18</sup> Political report to the 17th Congress of the C.P.S.U. (*Works*, vol. XIII, pp. 300-3).



the abyss of a new war on account of that treaty". He had, moreover, in referring to the restoration of normal relations between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. (in December, 1933), emphasised that it improved the chances of preserving peace. And in 1938 itself the Soviet Government, as we have seen, had repeatedly offered to co-operate in preserving peace.

Why were the Soviet offers rejected, if the British and French were so afraid of the revolutionary consequences of a war? Why was the chance of calling a halt to the declared organisers of world conquest, and therefore of world war, thrown away? Why did the British and French Governments prefer yet a further settlement with Hitler at someone else's expense, after all the previous deals of 1933-8—and even though it meant gambling with their own security in Europe—to a full understanding with the U.S.S.R. which would have inflicted such a check on Hitler as must inexorably have broken his prestige among his own people?

The answer to these questions is the answer to the question at the head of this chapter.

To some extent it was given, of course, by the experience of the years prior to 1938. And behind the scenes much was said in those years to make that clear. Some examples were given in the first part of this book; here are more. In 1935 Chamberlain himself, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, had replied to A. V. Ozersky, the Soviet Trade Representative in London, enquiring about credit and other facilities for expanding trade between the two countries: "But why should we assist our worst enemy!"<sup>19</sup> The Franco-Soviet pact of mutual assistance was never implemented by France in 1936 and 1937, wrote the French Ambassador in Moscow during those years, "because of the prejudices teeming in France against the Soviets and their régime".<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey Dawson, the editor of *The Times* (writes his biographer), was, in October and November, 1937, when his friend Lord Halifax went to Berlin, "fully cognisant" that "Nazi Germany undoubtedly stood as a wedge between Russian Communism and the West", and that to ring Germany about "with vigilant allied States, sometimes masquerading as the League of Nations, like trained elephants round a tiger in the jungle to prevent her expansion in any direction beyond the limits imposed twenty years ago" was a process which should be stopped—otherwise it must "lead inevitably to war and to the downfall of civilisation in the West".<sup>21</sup> That is to say, the

<sup>19</sup> Ozersky described the interview to the writer, immediately afterwards.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Coulondre, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Wrench, *op. cit.*, pp. 362-3.

"West" had more in common with Hitler than with the U.S.S.R.: if Hitler were overthrown on account of his "expansion", it would mean the overthrow of civilisation: if he expanded only against "Russian Communism", even at the expense of that "masquerade" known as the League of Nations, it would be a different story—and it was worth risking world war in the future for the sake of that. Then Chamberlain, Eden and Halifax met the French Premier Chautemps, his Foreign Minister Delbos and Léger, the permanent head of the Foreign Ministry, at the end of November, 1937 (just after Halifax's visit to Hitler). Chamberlain liked Chautemps. "He was quick and witty and, as it seemed to me, quite candid and straightforward. He did not conceal his dislike for Soviet Russia. . . ."<sup>22</sup> These dots are in the extract quoted by Chamberlain's biographer: a pity they should come just at that point.

Here one should draw attention to the special role of "dots", and other signs of omission and ellipsis, in the documents of the time. Again and again—in memoirs, diaries, collections of diplomatic documents—they appear and reappear, with almost invariable regularity, whenever the dangerous subject of the Soviet Union arises. In the same way masses of documents suddenly disappear, just when they would throw a good deal of light on what the spokesmen of "civilisation in the West" were saying about the Soviet Union. The French Yellow Book, published in 1939, is one example: it did not print a single document between March 13, 1938, and September 29 of that year. During those "pregnant" months it suffered—like other collections—"from vapours and faintness, and from a most remarkable mental blackout", in Professor Namier's sarcastic words.<sup>23</sup> Yet we know from Coulondre's, Noël's, François Poncet's, Gamelin's and Bonnet's memoirs—not to speak of the British and German diplomatic documents—that all kinds of important messages were passing, and opinions being expressed, through diplomatic channels, about relations with the U.S.S.R. Similarly the compilers of the collection of British documents on the Czechoslovak question in 1938 apparently believe that the eighteen letters and telegrams passing between London and the British Embassy in Moscow between March and September, 1938, which are printed in two bulky volumes containing over 1200 others to and from other capitals—vivid enough as they are for those seeking an insight into the spirit of the Foreign Office when it contemplates the Soviet Union—exhaust the correspondence on the subject. *Beati credentes!*

<sup>22</sup> Feiling, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

<sup>23</sup> *Diplomatic Prelude* (1948), p. 33.



Here is a striking example of the effectiveness of dots, in this connection, taken from a time long before Munich. King George V, we are told, "consulted Sir Robert Vansittart, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, as to whether there was in fact any possibility of our being able to reach a firm understanding with Nazi Germany". Vansittart replied on November 7, 1935: "I do not think it would be profitable to undertake any serious attempt for an agreement with Germany until our own national re-equipment is well under way. . . . Secondly, it would be essential that any such exploration should be undertaken in concert with the French. . . . Any arrangement with Germany will have to be paid for, and handsomely paid for. . . . I am convinced that modern Germany is highly expansive, and will become highly explosive if it is sought to cramp her anywhere. . . . Any attempt at giving Germany a free hand to annex other people's property in Central or Eastern Europe is both absolutely immoral and completely contrary to all the principles of the League which form the backbone of the policy of this country. Any British Government that attempted to do a deal would almost certainly be brought down in ignominy—and deservedly. . . . Any suggestion that a British Government contemplates leaving, let alone inviting, Germany to satisfy her land-hunger at Russia's expense, would quite infallibly split this country from top to bottom."<sup>24</sup>

When Vansittart wrote it was but six months since the Franco-Soviet pact had aroused violent criticism in Nazi and Tory circles: how much the passages replaced by dots after the reference to France might tell us! It was five months since the Anglo-German Naval Treaty: what extra bribes would have been needed to "pay for" an arrangement with Germany? It was also five months since the Peace Ballot results had shown the British people enthusiastic for collective security, and still less since the Tory Government had been returned to power by pretending that it shared their enthusiasm: could the dots after the sections about a deal giving Germany a free hand in Eastern Europe, and letting her satisfy herself at Russia's expense, have possibly replaced passages which throw light on who was considering such a deal? The incident is also an indication of the effectiveness of whole documents disappearing: might not the dots have a new significance, if we knew what the King had asked, in the first place? When the head of the State, who sees all important dispatches and discusses policy on intimate terms with successive Foreign Secretaries, asks questions which produce such an answer as Vansittart's, it is not a mere "incident".

<sup>24</sup> Harold Nicolson, *King George the Fifth* (1952), p. 529.

For these very reasons it should not be expected that, on the all-important question of the rejection of the Soviet offers, the published collections of official documents or memoirs of statesmen would contain memoranda or dispatches setting forth clearly the real reasons why the British and French Governments preferred agreement with Hitler—and the consequent aggression—to agreement with the Soviet Union. Dots and omissions are too convenient a device. One must fall back on circumstantial evidence in most cases. Only on a few occasions does a slip or chance oversight give a pointer: but when it does, the direction is always the same.

Thus on January 16, 1938, Chamberlain wrote to a friend in the U.S.A. that he was "about to enter upon a fresh attempt to reach a reasonable understanding with both Germany and Italy", and hoped for help in this from the U.S.A., particularly when it came to hinting to Hitler that overwhelming force might be used against him. In his diary, on February 19, he entered that from the first he had been "trying to improve relations with the two storm centres, Berlin and Rome".<sup>25</sup> We know already, from his speech in the House of Commons on February 21 in which he developed this idea, that he excluded the Soviet Union as "half Asiatic" from his four-Power scheme for settling the peace of Europe. These sentiments, "admirable as they sound out of their context, were alarming to devotees of collective security who lived on the eastern side of the Axis, remote from Britain and France, and who looked to the Soviet Republic to join at least with France, if not also with Britain in their defence. They were correspondingly encouraging to the declared enemies of the League of Nations at Berlin."<sup>26</sup> How much more alarming to the one, and encouraging to the other, Chamberlain's sentiments would have sounded, a month later, if they had known that, in a letter to another correspondent, he had written of "the Russians stealthily and cunningly pulling all the strings behind the scenes to get us involved in war with Germany"—because, three days before, they had offered their co-operation in stopping further aggression (Litvinov's proposal of March 17), at a time when Germany was "flushed with triumph" and Britain was unable to "beat her to her knees in a reasonable time!"<sup>27</sup>

Would not both have concluded that, should Hitler, flushed with triumph, have decided to attack the U.S.S.R., with or without the agreement of Poland, and whether or not he stopped by the way to devour Czechoslovakia, Chamberlain would have heaved a sigh of

<sup>25</sup> Feiling, *op. cit.*, pp. 324, 322.

<sup>26</sup> *Survey*, p. 55.

<sup>27</sup> Feiling, *op. cit.*, pp. 347-8.



relief (never mind what Vansittart had written two and a half years before)? The information was not disclosed at the time: but it provides a key to Munich. It was, indeed, shortly after this (April 4, 1938) that U.S. Ambassador Davies wrote from Moscow to Stephen Early, President Roosevelt's secretary: "Russia might be a helpful bulwark for the protection of international peace. The European democracies, however, seem deliberately to play into the hands of the Fascists in the effort to isolate completely the great power that is here from the rest of the world, and particularly from France and England. It is a pity, but it is true."<sup>28</sup>

What the minds of "the European democracies" were running on was in fact not very difficult to understand, for people who read the newspapers carefully, even then. But they would have been helped had they known that, on April 25, the British War Minister (Leslie Hore-Belisha) had a talk with the chief of the French General Staff about Germany's policy after the annexation of Austria—and "saw her ambitions, at least at first, towards Eastern Europe".<sup>29</sup> This remark indicates the real background to Chamberlain's complacent statement—at the meeting of British and French Ministers in London, three days later—that "he wondered if the picture of the European situation was as black as Daladier had painted it".<sup>30</sup> Churchill himself, only a few days before, had expressed privately the fear that Chamberlain intended to follow up the Italo-British Agreement signed on the 16th (giving Italy virtually a free hand in Ethiopia and Spain while the League of Nations was still pledged to support both) with "something even more specious with Germany, which will lull the British public while letting the German armed strength grow and German designs in the East of Europe develop".<sup>31</sup>

Churchill himself, however, did not always take pains to discourage those designs, judging by the translated record in the German archives of a conversation on July 14, 1938, between himself and Foerster, head of the Danzig Nazis, who was on a visit to England. At one point, the record runs: "I remarked that I did not believe that Germany really feared Russia, to which he replied that they knew for a fact of the existence of Russian airfields in Czechoslovakia, from which an attack could be launched on Berlin in half an hour. I replied that, in my opinion, it would be quite possible, as part of a general European agreement, to pledge Britain and France to come to Germany's assistance with all their forces should she be the victim of an unprovoked

<sup>28</sup> Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

<sup>30</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. I, p. 221.

<sup>29</sup> Gamelin, *op. cit.*, p. 318.

<sup>31</sup> Churchill, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

attack on the part of Russia through Czechoslovakia, or in any other way. He asked who was to determine who was the aggressor? I replied that the aggressor would be the nation that first forcibly crossed the frontier of another nation."<sup>32</sup>

But would the agreement work the other way, so far as the U.S.S.R. was concerned? On that Churchill seems to have said nothing. Naturally, this may be represented as a manoeuvre, only intended to draw Foerster out by dangling before him the bait of a one-sided guarantee (such as was implicit in Chamberlain's plans and speeches of February and March). But the curious thing is that it fitted in very well with a suggestion made by Chamberlain himself, during his talks with Hitler at Berchtesgaden on September 15. "The British Prime Minister asked whether German objections regarding this role of Czechoslovakia" (which Hitler had described as "a menace to Germany—a spearhead in Germany's side") "would cease to exist if it were possible so to alter the relations between that country and Russia that, on the one hand, Czechoslovakia would be released from her obligations to Russia *in the case of an attack on that country* and, on the other hand, if she like Belgium no longer had the possibility of obtaining assistance from Russia or another country" (the record kept by Schmidt, Hitler's interpreter; Chamberlain's own minute, made later for the Cabinet, spoke of Czechoslovakia not providing facilities for Soviet planes on her airfields).<sup>33</sup>

Thus in both cases, in July and September, the idea put to the Germans was that, if Hitler could find some way of attacking the U.S.S.R. which did not draw Britain into war, by the necessity of assisting France, the way might be open to him, if he wanted it.

Now it so happens that, more than once, the Nazis had suggested to the Polish Government that the two States should co-operate in "defending themselves against aggression from the East" (Hitler's expression in talking to the Polish Ambassador on January 24, 1935) and in a joint attack on Russia after which "the Ukraine would be a Polish sphere of influence and North-Western Russia would be Germany's" (Goering's expressions during a visit to Warsaw in February, 1935). "Russia is Asia—Germany was faced with the problem of finding areas for economic expansion or space for its population. Poland had not and could not provide either," Hitler said to the Polish Ambassador on May 22, 1935. "He was in favour of European solidarity, but in his opinion this solidarity ended at the Polish-Soviet frontier," he told the Ambassador on December 18, 1935. As

<sup>32</sup> D. & M., vol. I, pp. 136-7.

<sup>33</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. II, pp. 340, 347.



late as February 23, 1938, Goering gave the Polish Commander-in-Chief, Smigly-Rydz, "to understand that, in the event of war, it would not be difficult to inflict a military defeat on the Soviets".<sup>34</sup>

According to the then Polish leaders, throughout this period they had "firmly rejected any suggestion of a common Polish-German policy against the Soviets".<sup>35</sup> In reality, from 1934 they regularly sided with Hitler in all the stages of his expanding aggression, in which the U.S.S.R. was on the other side. They refused to join the proposed Eastern Locarno in 1935. In 1936 and 1937 they regularly opposed the cause of the Spanish Republic at the League, and in 1937 also refused to support the League's condemnation of Japan and appeal for aid to China. In March, 1938, they all but invaded Lithuania, being restrained only by a threat from the U.S.S.R. All this was done in full view of the world public. "The (Polish) government of colonels had vied with Hitler and Mussolini in its contempt for the League. . . . It had made its full contribution to the deterioration of the general situation of Europe, and in particular to the destruction of the League's power to prevent aggression", writes the League's extremely moderate and by no means anti-Polish former Deputy Secretary-General.<sup>36</sup>

Of course this conduct did not prove incontrovertibly that, if Hitler once more repeated his proposal for a joint operation against the U.S.S.R., the Polish Government would accept it. But who could tell, in the late summer of 1938? They might. Had not the chief of the Polish general staff quite recently (June 14) told the British military attaché in Warsaw, with many details, that "Russia would very soon reach a crisis which would put her out of action not for months but for years"? There was always the possibility, if that was the Polish view, that they might be tempted. And in that case France would not necessarily be drawn in under her treaty with the U.S.S.R. This was the real meaning of Chamberlain's innocent enquiry. And this makes it all the more natural to find General Gamelin recording, shortly afterwards, that when he was discussing the question of military co-operation with the British service chiefs in London, on September 26—it seemed a dark moment—it was "evident that the hypothesis of seeing Russia invade Poland" (i.e. should she attack Czechoslovakia) "hardly attracts our Allies".<sup>37</sup>

So much for the diplomatic documents before September, 1938. They begin to suggest the true explanation of British and French

<sup>34</sup> *Polish White Book* (London, 1939), pp. 24, 26, 29, 31, 45.

<sup>36</sup> F. P. Walters, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 793.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>37</sup> Gamelin, *op. cit.*, p. 352.

policy at Munich—that it was an agreement to let Hitler take Czechoslovakia, in the hope that it was but a temporary stopping place on the road to a German war with the Soviet Union. The reader will remember that this was precisely the explanation which Mr. Gedye got in official, diplomatic and political quarters in London, long before Munich. When we come to the memoirs of other eye-witnesses of that time, of participants in the tragedy, men who cannot be accused of Communist sympathies, we hear it again and again.

Beneš wrote: "Munich with all its catastrophic European consequences would not have occurred but for the hostility of Western Europe towards the Soviet Union and the differences between them. . . . The exclusion of the Soviet Union from all pre- and post-Munich discussions was equivalent—in the Soviet view—to an attack against the Soviet Union and to an attempt to secure its complete isolation. Moscow *rightly*" (the italics are Beneš') "feared that this fatal step could soon lead to a military attack by Germany against the Soviet Union."<sup>38</sup> If Moscow was right in *fearing*, Chamberlain could hardly avoid *hoping*: that is the logic of Beneš' words.

Wheeler-Bennett, present in Czechoslovakia in September, in fact writes: "This willingness to see Hitler dominant in Central and Eastern Europe was not, however, merely a by-product of the general trend of British diplomacy. It was of far greater significance than that, and represented one of the prime factors in the whole political situation. Behind the general desire for peace and for an 'accommodation' with Hitler then lay, if not in the mind of Mr. Chamberlain himself at any rate in the minds of some of his advisers, the secret hope that, if German expansion could be directed towards the East, it would in time come into collision with the rival totalitarian imperialism of Soviet Russia. In the conflict which would ensue both the forces of National Socialism and Communism would be exhausted. . . . It was believed by those who held these opinions that Bolshevik Russia was of greater danger to Britain than Nazi Germany."<sup>39</sup>

Paul-Boncour, dismissed by Daladier in April, 1938, because he favoured a policy of close political and military co-operation with the U.S.S.R., wrote in his memoirs (in 1942, after the defeat of France) that it was "the fear of Communism" (in this case the U.S.S.R.) "which made the frogs ask for the Führer who would protect them. This helped them to get the Anschluss, Munich, the suppression of Czechoslovakia. This had interfered with the utilisation of the Franco-Soviet pact, to the point of ruining it." This was the sentiment,

<sup>38</sup> Beneš, *op. cit.*, pp. 131, 240.

<sup>39</sup> Wheeler-Bennett, *op. cit.*, pp. 295-6.



he said, which had "hung so heavily on French foreign policy since 1936".<sup>40</sup>

Coulondre wrote from his Embassy in Moscow to Bonnet, on October 4, 1938 (a document not included in the French Yellow Book): "The Munich agreement, so pregnant with consequences for the future of all Europe, of which many of the values will doubtless have to be revised, is particularly heavy with menace for the Soviet Union." Is it to be supposed that Chamberlain did not see what Coulondre did? He continued: "With the neutralisation of Czechoslovakia, the road to the South-East is henceforth open to Germany. Will there be any Powers willing and able to prevent her entering it, or halting on it before she reaches Russia, in order to see there the *Lebensraum* announced in *Mein Kampf*? This question is certainly at present the central point of the Soviet Government's worries, and the negative reply which it is led to give to that question—not without good grounds, too" (my italics) "—is sufficient to explain the mood of the press."<sup>41</sup>

And Sumner Welles, Assistant Secretary of State of the U.S.A., who came on a tour of Europe in 1940? "It should never be forgotten", he wrote, "that the Soviet Union did not desert the League. It was the great Powers which dominated the League in its later years that deserted the Soviet Union." Hitler in 1938, said Welles, counted "on the unwillingness of both France and Great Britain to align themselves with the Soviet Union in a war in Central Europe. Nor did he underestimate the influence of those in the two western countries who still believed that German domination of Europe was preferable to the growth of Russian power."<sup>42</sup>

Here is another contemporary voice, that of Professor A. B. Keith—though a Tory professor of constitutional history, and not a diplomat, yet for many years a close student of modern diplomacy—writing on the very day of Munich (the note is reproduced in his book of 1940, *The Causes of the War*). Chamberlain and Daladier, he said, had "acquired the rank of peacemakers by the convenient method of imposing further surrenders on Czechoslovakia". They knew that Mussolini and Hitler were demanding wholesale concessions to the demands of Hungary and Poland. With German armies in possession of the ceded areas of Czechoslovakia, the latter—and Chamberlain and Daladier as well—would be compelled once more to accept the dictation of Germany and Italy. "The way will be made ready for

<sup>40</sup> J. Paul-Boncour, *op. cit.*, vol. III, pp. 153-4.

<sup>41</sup> Coulondre, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-6.

<sup>42</sup> Welles, *The Time for Decision* (1944), pp. 29, 34.

the undisputed control by these Powers of eastern Europe, preparatory to advance against Russia."<sup>43</sup>

Some of the statements quoted are clear and unambiguous, others couched in diplomatic language. But their principal meaning cannot be misunderstood.

Let us turn to later writers, historians. Three will suffice: none of them can be accused of being pro-Communist.

Professor L. B. Namier wrote in 1948: "Munich was a Four-Power Pact dictated by the Axis. Could the Western Powers believe that Hitler had reached the limit of his ambitions (and would now re-start painting Christmas cards), or were they willing to remain passive spectators if, for instance, he turned against the U.S.S.R.?" To ask a question in such a way is to answer it. Referring to Hitler's "offer" to Poland on October 24, 1938—to give up Danzig, allow a German corridor across the Polish Corridor, and sign an alliance with Germany—Namier wrote: "It had been assumed in the West that such an understanding would be directed against Russia, and aim at conquering *Lebensraum* in the East for both partners." And later on he added: "Ramsay MacDonald's 'Four-Power Pact' of 1933, associating the Western Powers with the Dictators, delineated the pattern of policy which led to the Munich surrender. . . . Did they mean to deflect Hitler against the East, especially against the Soviet Union? They yearned for peace all round; but if there had to be aggression, they like everyone else hoped that Hitler would start on some country other than their own, and at as great a distance from it as possible."<sup>44</sup> The difference between this policy and that of the U.S.S.R., on which Professor Namier did not enlarge, was that the latter strove, not to "deflect" Hitler westwards, but to enlist the help of Britain and France in checkmating him.

Then there is the *Survey of International Affairs* of Chatham House for 1938—a volume published in 1951, far less unkind to Chamberlain than Sir Lewis Namier, and one which strains every nerve to find something soothing to say about him. Writing of the British Conservatives who were in power, it says "a very numerous element" (to avoid saying "the overwhelming majority") were "peculiarly receptive of the German propaganda harping constantly on the theme that Britain had no interests in Central Europe, while the Reich had no intention of interfering with British interests in other continents". In France, "for the bulk of the bourgeoisie, Bolshevism was the enemy": and the "Right" (to avoid saying *all* the bourgeois parties,

<sup>43</sup> Keith, *op. cit.*, p. 362.

<sup>44</sup> *Diplomatic Prelude*, pp. xii, 146.



since the Government included both Radicals and Socialists, but none of the Right) "believed that Nazism could be canalised, that its anti-Bolshevism was a real matter of faith, that the peace of Western civilisation could be saved by deflecting Germany to the conquest of the East".<sup>45</sup>

Lastly we have the historian of the League of Nations—a non-party international civil servant for many years, correct and obviously anxious to be objective. From its exclusion from the negotiations over Czechoslovakia, writes Mr. Walters, and from the failure of its efforts to revive the security system of the Covenant (efforts which Britain took the lead in opposing), "the Soviet Government was justified in concluding that the British and French did not desire its participation in their search for peace. It drew also, doubtless with less justification, the conclusion that they secretly hoped to see Russia attacked by Germany and that, if this should happen, she could not count upon their help."<sup>46</sup> The only comment which the reader will probably make, after all the foregoing, will be to ask: why with "less justification"?

There can be no reasonable doubt that we have the answer to the question asked in the title of this chapter. The British and French Governments acted as they did in 1938 because they hoped, by handing over Czechoslovakia to Hitler, to keep the door open for him to commit further aggression in the east of Europe, preferably against the U.S.S.R. This was no new idea for the British Government: it had been an integral strand in their foreign policy for many years, and particularly since 1933. For the French Government it dated from a little later, but not very much later. That this put them in danger themselves they did not believe: they were too sure of Hitler as their partner in this scheme, and perhaps they thought he shared their belief in the nonsense which the British Embassy in Moscow (and some others) were feeding to them, about internal conditions in the U.S.S.R. It seemed a winning card. All that was now necessary, to back it up, was to build up their armaments as fast as possible, in order to make sure that Hitler kept his side of the bargain. Who would fail to choose attacking the Soviet Union—chaotic, militarily feeble, economically disorganised, politically oppressed, etc., etc.—rather than attacking powerful, democratic, prosperous and well-armed Britain and France?

That was the gamble of Munich: and there lies the error of calling it "appeasement". It was a good deal more than that.

<sup>45</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 167, 173-4. <sup>46</sup> Walters, *History of the League of Nations*, vol. II, p. 782.

If two gangsters, with an already long list of murders on their record, announce their intention of doing away with another victim: and two others, outwardly respectable businessmen, but who have been privately financing them for years in order to keep the gangsters away from their own well-lined safes, make all the arrangements with them for the new crime, each of the four may have his own little calculations. The calculations may be very different. The first two may be secretly planning to attack the second two, next time. The second two may be hoping that the next "job" they finance will rid them of a powerful business competitor—and of a pair of dangerous partners into the bargain. But for the moment these diverging motives are secondary. For the time being all four are partners—partners in a conspiracy, with both immediate and long-term ends. The latter may differ: the short-term ends coincide.

That is what went on in 1938, and culminated at Munich. For the moment, the victim was Czechoslovakia. For Hitler, seconded by his Italian partner, it was one more of his chain of "improvisations" on the road to fulfilment of *Mein Kampf*. For the British and French Governments, it was one more inducement to Hitler to go East—of course observing their interests—and ultimately to attack the Soviet Union. Which of these hopes would be realised, only the future could tell. But for the moment the conspiracy was certain—and all four were partners in it, their several parts in it determined by their circumstances.

Munich was a conspiracy for aggression.

## TOWARDS NEW AGGRESSIONS

## 1. Czechoslovakia

**I**MMEDIATELY after Munich political changes began in Czechoslovakia which completed the process of making sure that she should be totally impotent to resist further German demands. Poland took large areas in Silesia and Slovakia, with 225,000 inhabitants of whom more than half were Czechs. Hungary annexed a much larger area in Slovakia, with a population of 850,000 of whom over 300,000 were Slovaks and Ukrainians. In Slovakia and Trans-Carpathian Ukraine, Fascist groups, in the pay of Germany and Hungary respectively and regularly receiving orders from Berlin, were put in power, in charge of obedient "Parliaments" and "Cabinets" filled with their agents. In Bohemia and Moravia Beneš and Syrový resigned, and were replaced by men who could be relied upon not to make even a show of resistance to demands from Berlin. All the parties except the Communists were merged into two—one official, pro-Nazi, the "National Union", the other nominally in opposition, the "Party of Labour": the Communist Party was made illegal and went underground. Fascist groups functioned openly in addition, and were able to enforce (with the help of direct demands from Ribbentrop) various anti-Semitic measures. A special agreement with Germany put the railways at her disposal for troop transport. Many liberal newspapers were suppressed. The army was reduced in size and "cleansed" of officers known as supporters of Beneš.<sup>1</sup>

French (Schneider-Creusot) shares in the great Skoda armaments works were sold to a "Czech" firm—in reality passing under German control. The big chemical trust in the Sudeten area, Prager Verein, passed into the hand of I. G. Farben. Czech coal mines and banks were taken over in similar deals by German concerns.<sup>2</sup>

But all these measures were insufficient for Hitler's plans. He began

<sup>1</sup> A detailed account can be found by English readers in Ripka, *op. cit.*, ch. VI, sections 1 and 2.

<sup>2</sup> Matveyev, *op. cit.*, pp. 93, 106-7.

preparations in secret for what Chamberlain's opponents had anticipated in their public protests and warnings before Munich. On October 11, 1938—ten days after the German forces crossed the frontier—Keitel replied to a telegram from Hitler which had asked four questions, of which the first is the key one: "What reinforcements are necessary in the present situation to break all Czech resistance in Bohemia and Moravia?" On October 21, 1938, Keitel issued an order, signed by Hitler, to the heads of the armed forces, which stated that they "must be prepared at all times for the following eventualities: (i) the securing of frontiers of Germany and protection against surprise air attacks, (ii) the liquidation of the remainder of Czechoslovakia, (iii) the occupation of the Memelland" (in Lithuania). Detailed instructions for a surprise attack on Czechoslovakia, "if her policy should become hostile towards Germany", followed. On December 17, 1938, Keitel issued a supplementary order, that preparations for liquidating the rest of Czechoslovakia "are to continue on the assumption that no resistance worth mentioning is to be expected. To the outside world, too, it must clearly appear that it is merely an act of pacification and not a warlike undertaking."<sup>3</sup>

On March 15, 1939, these military preparations were put into effect. To make this as certain as possible, the Germans had made careful arrangements with their paid agents in Slovakia. Some time in the winter of 1938-9 two of these, Durčanský (Minister of Transport) and Mach (Minister of Propaganda) worked out with Goering a full programme for proclaiming the "independence" of Slovakia—"with strongest political, economic and military ties with Germany" (the Hungarians were intriguing to re-establish their century-old control of the country). Goering commented that they should be supported. "Czechoslovakia without Slovakia is still more at our mercy. Air bases in Slovakia are of great importance for the German Air Force for use against the East." On February 12, 1939, Hitler and Ribbentrop received Karmasin, a Slovak German (Secretary of State and organiser of Nazi storm-troops in Slovakia) and Tuka (a Slovak nationalist previously paid by Hungary but now in German employ), and received pledges of their co-operation. On March 11 (after the Prague Government had dismissed several of the Slovak Ministers for open separatist agitation) the new Slovak Government was in session when suddenly Bürckel (Nazi governor of Vienna), Seyss-Inquart (Nazi viceroy in Austria) and five German generals came into the

<sup>3</sup> Extensive extracts from the texts of these documents are printed in *Trial*, part II, pp. 42-4.



meeting and told the Government that they must proclaim the independence of Slovakia. They would not do so immediately. Accordingly, on March 13 the dismissed Premier (the Roman Catholic priest Tiso) and Durčanský were received by Hitler in Berlin, and were told that they must at once proclaim the independence of Slovakia, or "he would leave the destiny of Slovakia to the mercy of events, for which he would be no longer responsible". Ribbentrop added that Hungarian troops were moving to the Slovak frontier. Tiso accepted, and flew back to Slovakia in a German plane. The next day, the Slovakian Parliament proclaimed the "independence" of Slovakia.<sup>4</sup>

Now, in the evening of March 14, Hácha, Beneš' successor, was summoned to Berlin with his Foreign Minister Chvalkovský. They were brought to Hitler's office at 1.15 a.m.: Goering, Ribbentrop, Keitel and other officials were present. Hitler said that the German army had orders to march in at 6 a.m. that morning, and invited Hácha to discuss what should be done, adding that he would give Czechoslovakia "fullest autonomy" within the German Reich. The pretext given for this action was that "Beneš' tendencies were not completely revised" in the new State. Goering, in the subsequent conversations, threatened to bombard Prague. Finally, after hours of pressure, Hácha at 4.30 a.m. signed a document already prepared, which "entrusts with entire confidence the destiny of the Czech people and the Czech country to the hands of the Führer of the German Reich".<sup>5</sup> At dawn the same day, the German army entered the country from all sides. Hitler took up his quarters in Prague Castle, and in the afternoon issued a proclamation to the German army and people stating that "Czechoslovakia has ceased to exist".<sup>6</sup> On the 16th he issued a decree incorporating Czechoslovakia into Germany as the "Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia".

On March 15 Tiso placed Slovakia under Hitler's "protection", and German troops entered the country in large numbers. However, this did not prevent the eastern portions of Slovakia from being occupied (by preliminary agreement with Hitler) by Hungarian forces; who also occupied and annexed Trans-Carpathian Ukraine.

Nazi Germany derived great material benefit from the seizure of Czechoslovakia. On April 28, 1939, in a speech at the Kroll Opera

<sup>4</sup> Documents in *Trial*, part II, pp. 89-90, 93-6.

<sup>5</sup> Documents in *Trial*, part II, pp. 96-101.

<sup>6</sup> The proclamation talked of "wild excesses", "terror gangs" in Czechoslovakia and of "the number of oppressed and persecuted people crying for help" increasing hourly (*ibid.*, p. 115). This, six months after Munich! But why trouble to invent new pretexts?

House in Berlin, Hitler listed as follows the booty seized in Czechoslovakia, "international depot of explosives situated in the centre of Europe": 1582 planes; 2175 light and heavy guns, 735 mortars, 591 anti-aircraft guns, 43,876 machine-guns; 468 tanks. In addition, as Coulondre reported to Paris,<sup>7</sup> they had now complete control of the Skoda Works, which supplied armaments not only to their own country but to Yugoslavia and Rumania, her partners in the Little Entente, and aero engines to France. Owning these works (including Skoda establishments in Austria), as well as Krupps, put Germany in an exceptionally powerful position, politically as well as militarily. Moreover, Coulondre pointed out, "taking over Bohemia and Moravia is the first territorial operation which is not a deficit for the Reich from the food point of view. On the contrary, it very tangibly improves Germany's supply position, not only because of the relative fertility of Bohemia and Moravia but also, and above all, because the Reich is now at the very door of the Hungarian and Rumanian granaries." Germany lacked one and a half million workers for industry and agriculture: she now had three million Czechs who, unsafe for military service, would enable her to mobilise her own manpower for the army to the full. Her strategic position too had greatly improved for pressure on the countries in Europe: a sign of this was that she had already followed up her conquest of Czechoslovakia (he was writing on March 19) by setting up a fourth Air Fleet, based on Vienna.

The way for this had already been prepared by March in the economic field. Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Rumania and Hungary had, in the three months following Munich, signed agreements with Germany to supply her with huge quantities of grain, fats, pigs, oil, certain other minerals and other raw materials. Funk, the German Minister of Economics, had called this the building up of "an economic area which will stretch from the North Sea to the Black Sea and will be naturally self-sufficient".<sup>8</sup> What he meant was that the entire resources of the area he mentioned would shortly be at the disposal of the Nazi war machine.

## 2. Spain

Aggression in Europe by both Hitler and Mussolini was already in progress when the preparations for the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia began in March, 1938. This was in Spain. It received great

<sup>7</sup> *French Yellow Book* (1939), pp. 89-90.

<sup>8</sup> Article of October 17, 1938, quoted by Ripka, *op. cit.*, p. 302.



encouragement from British and French Government policy in the subsequent months, and Munich gave it the final impetus.

In March and April, 1938, supported by some 50,000 Italian and 15,000 German "technicians", air crews and communications troops, Franco developed an offensive against the Republican armies, which he succeeded in breaking through, and reached the Mediterranean at Valencia on April 16. For a few weeks in those months the French Government reopened the frontier to war supplies for the Republic, but much too late to affect the campaign. On June 13 the frontier was closed again.

On April 16, the British Government—despite its clearly-expressed promise at the League of Nations Assembly in September, 1937, to consider ending non-intervention if the "veritable foreign army corps" on Spanish soil were not withdrawn "in the near future" (which the French and British delegates privately said meant about ten days)—signed an agreement with the Italian Government pledging good-neighbour relations on a number of Mediterranean questions (including recognition of Italian sovereignty over Ethiopia, i.e. earlier aggression). On May 13, 1938, at the session of the League Council, the British and French Governments voted against a resolution ending non-intervention, i.e. restoring the Spanish Government's rights under international law. It cannot be doubted that this perfidious conduct reflected the anxiety of the British and French Governments to do nothing which would annoy Hitler and Mussolini. Indeed, at the September, 1937, Assembly, Blum as French Prime Minister had already begged del Vayo not to name Germany and Italy as aggressors, as that would "prejudice the conversations with Italy": and in May, 1938, "there can be no doubt that Lord Halifax insisted on the rejection of the resolution in the light of the delicate relations existing between Britain and Italy".<sup>9</sup>

The net result was that Mussolini flatly refused to discuss any withdrawal of his forces throughout the whole period of the negotiations over Czechoslovakia. On the contrary, more troops and planes were sent to Spain, and Mussolini openly declared (in a speech on May 15) that Italy and France were "on the opposite sides of the barricade". This was rightly interpreted by Bonnet as connected with the "extreme gravity of the international situation", i.e. the German threats to Czechoslovakia. From March until September, a series of

<sup>9</sup> See the accounts of these proceedings by Robert Dell, one of several well-informed eye-witnesses of the transactions at Geneva, in *The Geneva Racket*, pp. 156-76: and a later account of "non-intervention" by Patricia van der Esch, *Prelude to War* (The Hague, 1951), pp. 109-16.

air attacks on British ships in Spanish ports took place: but on June 13 Chamberlain publicly announced in the House of Commons that nothing could be done about it, while the French Government simultaneously gave secret orders to close the Spanish frontier; and on July 6 a Paris court upheld the refusal of the Bank of France to make available to the Spanish Government its own gold—£7,500,000 worth, deposited in Paris since 1931.

Thus, at every point, preparations for one aggression helped to finish off another, and the Spanish Republic was gradually strangled by British and French policy. The process could now be speeded up. At Munich, Chamberlain suggested a Four-Power Conference to arrange a truce in Spain: Mussolini in return promised him to withdraw 10,000 men. These went in the middle of October, mostly wounded and sick (foreign volunteers on the Republic's side had been withdrawn in September). On November 2, Chamberlain submitted the Anglo-Italian agreement for ratification. The French had already recognised the King of Italy as "Emperor of Ethiopia" on October 2: the British Government did so on November 16: on November 28 Chamberlain announced that he and Lord Halifax would visit Rome. Already (as we now know) Mussolini had on October 28 told Ribbentrop that he would send more arms to Franco.<sup>10</sup> Chamberlain's announcement was followed on November 30 by scenes in the Italian Parliament, when the deputies shouted their demands for territory belonging to France—"Tunisia! Corsica! Nice!"

Thus the greater was assistance to the aggressor, the bigger and more brazen his demands; but this did not deter the British and French Governments from pursuing the course mapped out before Munich and at Munich. On January 11-14, 1939, the British Ministers visited Rome. In Chamberlain's conversations with Mussolini, many generalities were talked: but the British Prime Minister accepted without question the Italian statements that they now had "only" 20-25,000 men in Spain and that they would remain until Tarragona and Barcelona were occupied. All Lord Halifax wanted was assurances to France (such as Italy had given to Great Britain) that they would not exploit a Franco victory against her, and "not advertising more than was necessary the help they were giving to General Franco".<sup>11</sup> In fact, the British Ministers got no reassurances for France at all—and Mussolini and Hitler soon had the opportunity of satisfying themselves that this refusal, keeping the Western Governments guessing, brought satisfactory results.

<sup>10</sup> *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers* (London, 1948), p. 246. <sup>11</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. III, pp. 521-3.



On December 23 Franco had opened a new offensive against Catalonia. On January 15 Tarragona was taken. On January 18 Chamberlain and Daladier simultaneously announced—the one in a letter to Attlee, the other by a decision of the French Cabinet—their refusal even to discuss the ending of non-intervention. Ciano had told the British Ambassador on the 16th that thirty regular battalions, fully equipped, were ready to embark at the first sign of French intervention: “We shall do this even if it should provoke a European war.”<sup>12</sup> On January 26 Barcelona fell, and on February 27 Great Britain and France simultaneously recognised Franco. On March 29 his troops occupied Madrid. The part played by the British and French Governments had “heightened the contempt of the Axis powers for the strength of the democratic world and contributed to the blind presumption which ultimately plunged Europe and the world into general war”.<sup>13</sup>

The last days of the Spanish war were moreover marked by an extremely characteristic attempt to curry favour with Mussolini, the consequence of his more than frigid attitude to previous French approaches. On February 2 Baudouin, president of the French Banque de l'Indochine, saw Ciano on secret instructions from Daladier and Bonnet. He offered Italy (i) a free zone in the French Somaliland port of Djibouti, at which the only railway to Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, ended, (ii) ownership of that part of the railway which fell within Ethiopia, with customs-free transit rights from Ethiopia to the free port, (iii) help in securing seats on the Board of Directors of the Suez Canal, (iv) guarantees for Italians living in Tunis. A similar approach, made in Addis Ababa, promised in addition some frontier revisions in North Africa favouring Italy. In agreeing to open official negotiations on these points (Ciano told the German Ambassador on February 4), Mussolini did not object to “peaceful solutions” for these questions “of the first stage”: but added that this did not affect in the slightest degree “the further, second, ‘historical’ stage”.<sup>14</sup>

In plainer language, he would take what he could peacefully, since the French were giving things away: but the “historical” questions—Tunis itself, Nice, Corsica—would be solved by war at the “second” stage.

On February 27 the Italian Ambassador proposed, and on March 10 the Germans agreed, to begin talks between the general staffs of the armed forces of Italy and Germany. The draft notes for these had

<sup>12</sup> Ciano, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Van der Esch, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

<sup>14</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. IV, pp. 575-7, 582-3.

already been drawn up by the supreme command of the German armed forces and communicated by Keitel to Ribbentrop on November 30, 1938.<sup>15</sup> Their section headed: “Military political basis for the negotiations” is worth reproducing, for it was the background to the last stages of the German-Italian invasion of Spain, as the instructions to Keitel of October 21 were for the last months of the mutilated Czechoslovakia. It runs:

“War by Germany and Italy against France and Britain, with the object first of knocking out France. That would also hit Britain, as she would lose her bases for carrying on the war on the Continent and would then find the whole power of Germany and Italy directed against herself alone.

“Combined with:

“Strict neutrality of Switzerland, Belgium and Holland.

“Benevolent neutrality towards Germany and Italy: Hungary and Spain.

“Doubtful attitude: Balkans and Poland.

“Hostile attitude towards Germany and Italy: Russia.

“The Non-European powers can be left out of the picture at the beginning.”

This was the basis on which Hitler agreed to open staff talks with Italy, on the eve of the “liquidation” of the rest of Czechoslovakia. It was also the reward of the British and French Governments for destroying a democratic Republic in Western Europe as they had in Central Europe.

### 3. Poland

The Polish Government was also to have its reward. Not content with taking the jackal's piece out of Czechoslovakia at Munich, Beck after it unreservedly made himself “the auxiliary of the German Chancellor”.<sup>16</sup>

But whereas previously (and since the Polish-German pact of 1934) Hitler had repeatedly sworn that there were no questions of issue between Germany and Poland, now suddenly, on October 24, 1938, there was a change of tune. On that day Ribbentrop invited Lipski, the Polish Ambassador in Germany, to lunch at Berchtesgaden, and in the course of it made the following proposals.<sup>17</sup> (i) Danzig, which

<sup>15</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. IV, pp. 529-32.

<sup>16</sup> Noël, *L'Aggression allemande contre la Pologne* (Paris, 1946), pp. 205-6.

<sup>17</sup> An account of the successive stages in these negotiations, from October 24, 1938, to February 6, 1939 (and beyond), is contained in the documents of the *Polish White Book*, 1939.

had belonged to Poland since the Versailles Treaty, should be returned to Germany, (ii) Germany should be allowed to build an extra-territorial motor road and railway line across the Polish Corridor, (iii) Poland would have railway and economic facilities at Danzig, (iv) Polish-German frontiers would be guaranteed, and the pact extended by twenty-five years. There would also be joint action on colonial questions, emigration of Polish Jews (Beck had publicly raised this question as a "demographic problem for Poland", at the League of Nations) and a "joint policy towards Russia". If Poland agreed to the main proposals (Ribbentrop added later), she would get satisfaction over her claims in Trans-Carpathian Ukraine (then called "Carpathian Russia")—on which she was in conflict with Hungary.

Although the Polish Government rejected the proposals straight away then and on later occasions, reminding the Germans of specific declarations by Hitler on November 5, 1937 (that "there would be no changes in the legal and political position of Danzig"), and on January 14, 1938 (that "Polish rights in Danzig would be in no way violated"), the Germans went on, suavely but firmly, pressing them. Ribbentrop renewed them in a talk on November 19, 1938, underlining that he had only talked "indefinitely" with Hitler on the subject, and that (a delicate hint) "negotiations with Poland were of quite a different character from those with M. Beneš for Czechoslovakia"; but that "Danzig was a German city". On November 22, von Moltke, the German Ambassador in Warsaw, took up the point with Beck, assuring him however that "he had always warned M. von Ribbentrop that Danzig was a problem in regard to which the Polish attitude was adamant". On January 5, 1939, Hitler told Beck that as Danzig was a German city, "sooner or later it must return to the Reich". He was sure that an agreement protecting the legitimate interests of both countries could be found: then all difficulties between the two States "could quite definitely be settled and cleared out of the way". In that case he would give an assurance like that he had already given the French—that the question of Alsace-Lorraine had been settled for good. Hitler also talked about the need for "greater freedom of communication between Germany and East Prussia". But he wanted Beck "to be quite at ease"—there would be no *faits accomplis* in Danzig. Next day Ribbentrop repeated to Beck that "Germany was not seeking any violent solution". He repeated this in later conversations in Warsaw, on January 26. On February 6, 1939, the German Ambassador in Warsaw, while "under no illusions whatever

as to the difficulties", nevertheless told Count Szembek, the Polish Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, that "from the point of view of our general relations, and also from the historical standpoint, it would be desirable to achieve a definite solution".

Right up to the entry into Prague, nothing more violent passed between the two governments, in these (and other) conversations. But behind the scenes, things were very different.

On November 24, 1938, Keitel had issued an appendix to a previous order by Hitler, stating that "preparations are to be made for a surprise occupation by German troops of the Free State of Danzig". True, he added that in making these preparations, "the primary assumption is the lightning seizure of Danzig by exploiting a favourable political situation, and not war with Poland".<sup>18</sup> But of course, in reality—as was obvious, not only from common-sense considerations, but also from the way the Poles had reacted to Ribbentrop's suggestions—war with Poland would thereafter be inevitable. Preparations were accordingly put in hand. By December 6, 1938, the British military attaché was reporting that various "military preparations in February for action in an easterly direction", to take place "in the early summer", had already begun; and he had heard that these *might* be against Poland, though other alternatives were suggested.<sup>19</sup>

What we know is that, in a lecture at Munich on November 7, 1943, Jodl said: "The bloodless solution of the Czech conflict in the autumn of 1938 and spring of 1939, and the annexation of Slovakia, rounded off the territory of Greater Germany in such a way that it now became possible to consider the Polish problem on the basis of more or less favourable strategic premises."

Much the same idea had been elaborated by Hitler in the speech to his generals on November 23, 1939, already quoted: "The next step was Bohemia, Moravia and Poland. This step, too, it was not possible to accomplish in one campaign. First of all, the western fortifications had to be finished. It was not possible to reach the goal in one effort. It was clear to me, from the first moment, I could not be satisfied with the Sudeten-German territory. That was only a partial solution. The decision to march into Bohemia was made: then followed the erection of the Protectorate and, with that, the basis for the action against Poland was laid."<sup>20</sup>

Thus (i) an attack on Poland was part of a premeditated scheme, (ii) Hitler could not think of it until the first stage in wiping out

<sup>18</sup> *Trial*, part II, p. 68. <sup>19</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. II, pp. 546-51. <sup>20</sup> *Trial*, part II, p. 107.



Czechoslovakia had been completed, (iii) even in preparing for the second stage, Hitler began the *planning* of the attack on Poland, (iv) while drawing up his plans he maintained the friendliest tones in talking to the Polish Government, yet already dropping the first hints of what—later on—was to be the pretext of the attack. The essential point was the completion of the first stage—and that was achieved at Munich. Those who conspired with Hitler to carry out that aggression were in fact conspiring with him for the next stage (March 15)—and doubtless unconsciously for the stage after that, Poland.

#### 4. Ukrainian Mirage

Thus two conspiracies in progress were brought swiftly to their conclusion, while active preparations began for a third aggression. No small part in producing the co-operation of the British and French Governments in procuring the final triumph of German aggression in Czechoslovakia and Italo-German aggression in Spain, and in blinding their eyes to the preparations against Poland, was played by their illusions about a coming attack on the Soviet Union—in particular, for the seizure of Soviet Ukraine.

The latter idea was no new one for the Nazis, and all politicians knew it. Hitler had written about it in *Mein Kampf* long before coming to power. Within a few months of his appointment as Reichschancellor, at the World Economic Conference in London in June, 1933, his delegate Hugenberg (Minister of Economics) had startled everyone by issuing a memorandum asking for lands in Eastern Europe for Germany to colonise. At the Nuremberg Nazi Congress in 1936, Hitler himself had spoken about how Germany “would swim in plenty” if she had the raw materials of the Urals, the Siberian forests and “the unending cornfields of the Ukraine”. Former Russian landowners in the Ukraine entered his pay, proclaimed themselves “Ukrainian” patriots, founded propaganda bureaux in Berlin and other European capitals, and found a ready response among Right-wing politicians and bankers in London, Paris, New York and elsewhere. Moreover, in Poland other emigrants from Soviet Ukraine were able to take advantage of the rabid national oppression practised by the ruling classes of Poland—landlords and capitalists—in Western Ukraine (and Western Belorussia). These territories, inhabited by Ukrainians (and Belorussians) and recognised in 1919 even by the Allies who were then invading Soviet Russia as rightfully part of the Ukraine and Belorussia respectively, were forcibly occupied by the Polish army

in 1919-20, and the Soviet Government at that time was not strong enough to reclaim them.

With the disintegration of Czechoslovakia after Munich, the Germans began intensively cultivating the Ukrainian nationalists in Trans-Carpathian Ukraine (“Ruthenia”), the extreme eastern tip of Czechoslovakia which had been promised autonomy at Versailles but had never got it, and had been left in great economic and cultural backwardness. Controlled more and more after Munich by Nazi agents, this territory was a very convenient centre for transplanting Nazi-inspired Ukrainian nationalist propaganda from Berlin and Viennese offices and cafés on to what was, after all, authentic Ukrainian soil. A “National Council” for a “Greater Ukraine” was set up there on December 8, 1938. The Germans began to throw out the idea that “Carpathian Ukraine” with its 700,000 population, might play the same part as Piedmont-Sardinia did for Italy in the 19th century, i.e. become the military and political base for unifying the whole Ukrainian people—both the thirty millions living in the Soviet Ukraine and the ten millions living under Polish rule. The advantage of this propaganda for Hitler was that it kept other countries guessing as to whether it was more directed against the U.S.S.R. or against Poland. In fact, of course, the Ukrainian Nazis had no chances in the Soviet Ukraine, where there had been complete economic, cultural and political regeneration since the end of the Civil War in 1920 for the working class, peasantry and intelligentsia: whereas Nazi-backed nationalist propaganda had a fertile field in Poland, where the mass of the Ukrainians lived under no better conditions than under Tsardom.

But this was just not accessible to the intelligence of British and French politicians: and when the propaganda of a “Greater Ukraine” began to come up in their own countries, as well as from obviously German sources, the mirage of a coming German “crusade for the Ukraine” began to beckon to them more and more alluringly. For more than three months, these day-dreams were indulged in: all the more because they seemed the very justification and realisation of the British and French Governments’ purposes in bringing about Munich.

On October 20 M. François-Poncet, in his final dispatch from the French Embassy at Berlin before his transfer to Rome, wrote after a talk with Hitler that the latter remained “faithful to his preoccupation of pulling apart the Franco-British bloc and stabilising peace in the west in order to have his hands free in the east”. True, as yet, it was not clear whether it was Poland, Russia or the Baltic States who



would "pay the price".<sup>21</sup> But on October 20 Lord Halifax was already telling Sir George Ogilvie-Forbes, the British Chargé d'Affaires at Berlin, that, "as we see it here", it might be "in the minds of the Germans that Ruthenia would, if necessary, furnish a springboard to the Ukraine or a starting place for fomenting a Ukrainian movement".<sup>22</sup> And on November 1, writing to the British Ambassador at Paris, "to show you how my thoughts are working", the Foreign Secretary spoke of "the problem raised by possible German expansion into the Ukraine. Subject only to the consideration that I should hope France would protect herself—and us—from being entangled by Russia in war with Germany, I should hesitate to advise the French Government to denounce the Franco-Soviet pact, as the future is still far too uncertain".<sup>23</sup>

In undiplomatic language, this meant that France should keep the pact in order to be able to call for Soviet help if Germany struck westwards: but on no account should France and Britain place any barriers in Hitler's way if he wanted to "go east" (though this might mean, not actual war with the U.S.S.R., but frightening the latter into giving up the Ukraine voluntarily: such lunatic ideas were quite common in 1938, the fruit of the singularly misnamed "intelligence" reports constantly coming in from the foreign embassies in Moscow).

On November 9 Ogilvie-Forbes was ready with his information. If Hitler were to ask for Danzig and the Corridor, Poland would need compensation. "I have indications that Hitler, about to take his stand on the Ruthenian springboard, is playing with the idea of associating Poland in a conflict with Russia at a moment when the Soviet Union is weak and, success being assured, compensating Poland at the expense of the Bolsheviks." However, he did not think this likely "in the immediate future".<sup>24</sup> Exactly a week later, Lord Halifax and Mr. Chamberlain were told by the Hohenzollern King of Rumania, Carol II, of whom they had audience in London, that "he had reason to believe that both Germany and Poland had ideas on the establishment of an independent Ukrainian State"—with a disquisition on whether Rumania would be worried or not.<sup>25</sup>

There can be no doubt that these reports raised comfortable anticipations in the minds of the British leaders. For on November 24, 1938, during a visit by Chamberlain and Halifax to Paris, attended by Cadogan and William Strang, we find the British Premier talking over the matter quite seriously with Bonnet and Daladier.

<sup>21</sup> *French Yellow Book*, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. III, p. 201.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

"There had been indications that there might be in the minds of the German Government an idea that they could begin the disruption of Russia by the encouragement of agitation for an independent Ukraine. There was no question of the German Government taking military action. It was more subtle than that. But if there were any truth in these rumours it would be unfortunate if France should one day find herself entangled as a consequence of her relations with Russia. He asked whether the French Government had given consideration to this point."

Bonnet replied that there were probably separatist movements in the Ukraine, which might create a dangerous situation if Russia were unable to repress them herself.

"Mr. Chamberlain asked what the position would be if Russia were to ask France for assistance on the grounds that a separatist movement in the Ukraine was provoked by Germany.

"M. Bonnet explained that French obligations towards Russia only came into force if there were a direct attack by Germany on Russian territory.

"Mr. Chamberlain said that he considered M. Bonnet's reply entirely satisfactory."<sup>26</sup> And well he might—since it meant that military assistance by Germany—in the form of the entry of German troops—to a "separated" Ukraine need not be treated by the French Government as an attack on "Russian territory".

This was not surprising. The French press had been discussing "the Ukrainian problem" with gusto in recent weeks, and a leading article in the *Temps* of November 29 said that interest of the Western powers in East European conflicts must necessarily be much more limited than before. Reporting these developments to Berlin on November 30, the German Ambassador at Paris, von Welczeck, wrote: "From what I hear, the Quai d'Orsay has requested those sections of the press amenable to its instructions not to arouse any exaggerated hopes of an imminent Russo-Polish *rapprochement*, to stress the unstable nature of relations in Eastern Europe and Polish responsibility for this, and at the same time to point out that the Ukrainian question has now been raised. These ideas recur in the above-mentioned leading article of the *Temps*. They were also reproduced by and large in the other organs of the press where, so far as can be ascertained up to now, the emphasis was laid on the Ukrainian problem. I hear that this is attributable at least in part to representations made by financial circles here, formerly connected with South Russia, to the French

<sup>26</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. III, pp. 306-7.



Government and to the French press. These circles are convinced that sooner or later Germany will tackle the solution of the Ukrainian problem, and they consider it essential to demonstrate French interest in the matter now."<sup>27</sup>

The latter point meant that the Franco-Belgian banks who had held the greater part of the shares in the coal, iron, steel and heavy engineering industries nationalised in the Ukraine in 1917,<sup>28</sup> wanted France to have her share in the pickings, if the German army got that far! At any rate, it was obvious that the French Government, no less than the British, was keenly interested in Hitler's plans for "solving the Ukrainian problem", and would not dream of throwing any obstacle in his way.

It is interesting that on the same day Mr. Newton was cabling from Prague—when German influence and propaganda were now paramount—that "there is a general feeling that the Ukraine question is becoming ripe for development".<sup>29</sup>

On December 6 Ogilvie-Forbes in Berlin returned to the matter. "There seems to be a consensus of opinion in both Nazi and non-Nazi circles that the next objective, which may even be undertaken in 1939, is the establishment, with or without Polish co-operation, of an independent Russian Ukraine under German tutelage. This operation might conceivably be formed by peaceful means owing to the inability of Russia to resist, but it is assumed that war will be necessary." It was thought by "most people", he informed Lord Halifax, "that neither France nor England would be prepared to march in the defence of the integrity of Russia or of Ukrainian independence of Russia". At the same time the British diplomat noted that there was "a school of thought here" which believed that Hitler would not risk a Russian adventure until he had made certain of his western flank, and that his first task would consequently be "to liquidate France and England".<sup>30</sup> However, these were evidently exceptional opinions. Lord Halifax must have been more impressed by the "consensus of opinion" from other directions too—for on December 13 he forwarded to the British Embassy in Moscow the report of a conversation between the head of the French Military Intelligence Department (*Deuxième Bureau*) and the British military attaché in Paris on December 6—the same day as Ogilvie-Forbes' message—to the effect that the Soviet Union was "militarily entirely impotent,

<sup>27</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. II, p. 469.

<sup>28</sup> Lyashchenko, *Istoria Narodnogo Hoziaistva S.S.S.R.* (Moscow, 1952), vol. II, pp. 374-82.

<sup>29</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. III, p. 368.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 387.

and that she would find it very difficult to offer any effective resistance to a movement for independence in the Soviet Ukraine, if such a movement were actually supported by Germany".<sup>31</sup>

It is still more significant that in the Foreign Affairs Committee of the French Senate on December 14 Bonnet made a statement similar to that he had recently made to Chamberlain—that the mutual assistance pact with the U.S.S.R. would not come into force if a separate "Ukrainian State" were set up.<sup>32</sup> And that this desirable end might be in sight, a dispatch from Coulondre at Berlin, the following day, must have made Bonnet even more confident.

"To make himself master of Central Europe by 'vassalising' Czechoslovakia and Hungary, then to create Greater Ukraine under German hegemony: such seems essentially to be the conception now adopted by the Nazi leaders, and doubtless by M. Hitler himself. . . . As for the Ukraine, the whole National-Socialist personnel has been talking about it these last ten days. The Rosenberg Study Centre, the services of Dr. Goebbels, the Ost-Europa organisation directed by the former Minister Curtius, the Intelligence Service are engaged on the question. The ways and means are not determined yet, it seems, but the goal seems definitely fixed: to create a Greater Ukraine which would become the feeding-territory for Germany. For this, it is necessary to constrain Rumania, convince Poland, make the U.S.S.R. relax its grip: German dynamism does not stop at any of these difficulties, and in military circles they are already talking of striding on to the Caucasus and Baku.

"It is improbable that M. Hitler is seeking to carry out his Ukraine enterprise by direct military action. . . . In his entourage people are thinking of an operation which would reproduce, on a bigger scale, that of the Sudeten." It is very possible, Coulondre concluded, that Hitler saw in the "Ukrainian enterprise", among other advantages, that of "distracting the attention of his people from dangerously increasing internal difficulties".<sup>33</sup>

A dazzling prospect indeed: no wonder the French Ambassador in London, on December 16, told Lord Halifax that "the information of the French Government was that Herr Hitler was contemplating some move in the East, with also possibly action in Memel". Maisky the previous day "had affected not to take very seriously suggestions

<sup>31</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. III, p. 578.

<sup>32</sup> J. Bauvier, J. Gacon, *La Vérité sur 1939* (Paris, 1953, p. 49), quoting the *Revue Politique et Parlementaire* for 10 January, 1939.

<sup>33</sup> *French Yellow Book*, pp. 39-40.

of the German Government making trouble in the Russian Ukraine": in Poland was more likely, the Soviet Ambassador had said. Halifax also thought the greater probability was that Hitler's next "disturbing move" would perhaps be towards the East. At the same time Britain and France should be on their guard that Hitler might turn West instead. One reason was because he "might think that either or both of us might be tempted to obstruct his Eastern plan".<sup>34</sup>

One may hazard the guess that Hitler was, on the contrary, quite certain that "either or both of us"—at least so far as the Governments in London and Paris were concerned, and those whom they could influence—would see him damned before they obstructed him in such a plan, provided that only the U.S.S.R. were involved. It is hard to believe that the German Embassy in London at this time was less well able to appreciate the situation than, say, the Polish Ambassador Count Raczynski. For he wrote to his Foreign Minister that very day, December 16: "Notwithstanding all the talk of the active elements of the opposition, a conflict in Eastern Europe which threatens in one way or another to embroil Germany and Russia is *universally and sub-consciously regarded here as a 'lesser evil' capable of deferring the menace to the Empire and its overseas components for a long period*" (underlining in the original). "The Premier officially is particularly careful to avoid doing anything to oppose Germany's designs in the East", added the Ambassador.<sup>35</sup>

The dispatch remarked on "something in the nature of an organised campaign among the public and the press here", which had been going on "for some time"—primarily around the problem of Trans-Carpathian Ukraine and "the claims on the Ukraine", but extending to other subjects like Danzig, Teschen, etc. Raczynski rightly pointed out that this was giving rise to alarm among the public about Poland's situation.<sup>36</sup>

Evidently the public had a truer sense of proportion than its Government, which saw ahead only, in a golden haze as it were, the Holy Graal leading the modern Parsifal on to the Ukraine. But it is interesting that, at the same time, a similar campaign was going on in the French newspapers<sup>37</sup>—and the German and German-inspired newspapers too, noted the French-language Soviet *Journal de Moscou* on December 27. It added that, "if the Western European Powers are foolish enough to fall into the trap set for them by Germany, it is their own business. The Soviet Union for its part remains absolutely

<sup>34</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. III, pp. 436-7.

<sup>35</sup> D. & M., vol. I, pp. 300-1.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303.

<sup>37</sup> Werth, *op. cit.*, p. 353.

indifferent to the noise made outside its frontiers over the so-called Ukrainian question."<sup>38</sup>

On December 29, 1938, Sir George Ogilvie-Forbes transmitted a bulky memorandum on "military possibilities in 1939" from the military attaché in Berlin, Col. Mason-Macfarlane. In a covering note, Ogilvie-Forbes said that there were factors in Germany which pointed "to the necessity of relieving by some foreign excursion the present political and economic discontents". If they assumed serious proportions, Hitler might decide on a foreign adventure—"in that case it is probable that it would be in an easterly direction". For the first time, however, it appears to have dawned on the Chargé d'Affaires that this might be against Poland, as an alternative to attacking the Soviet Union. Mason-Macfarlane's memorandum reported from Lithuanian sources that the Poles would be invited to join with Germany in military action against the Soviet Union, but would be attacked themselves if they refused. Mason-Macfarlane's own opinion was that the information may have been deliberately planted on the Lithuanians, "with intent to mislead", and he seems to have given much more weight to forecasts of action against the U.S.S.R.:

"For some time past there have been many rumours of intended German action in the Ukraine next year, and reports of preparations for commercial penetration and exploitation have been circulating. Our recent information regarding the commencement of progressive mobilisation in February gives the occupation of the Ukraine as the military objective."

Like Lord Halifax, the military attaché at the same time considered that hostilities against England instead were "a possibility which we cannot under any circumstances afford to exclude". However, in discussion with his Dutch colleague they had "placed the odds on action in the East as against action in the West at about 10 to 1". Provided there was no intervention from the West, Hitler was probably—"and in my opinion rightly"—convinced that he was strong enough to deal with Poland "and any opposition to be anticipated from Russia".<sup>39</sup>

On December 30 the British Ambassador in Paris, however, transmitted a report from Col. Fraser, his military attaché, without any such reservations as Mason-Macfarlane had felt it necessary to include. Col. Petibon, General Gamelin's most confidential staff officer,

<sup>38</sup> Mr. Vereker (Moscow) to Lord Halifax, December 28, 1938 (D.B.F.P., vol. III, pp. 541-2).

<sup>39</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. III, pp. 545-51.



had shown himself on the 29th "strongly of the opinion that there would be war in Europe next year, although he said that it was possible that neither France nor England might be engaged. He was evidently thinking of the Ukraine."<sup>40</sup>

Nor was the impression made by Mason-Macfarlane's reservations very lasting. In a review of the situation by Ogilvie-Forbes on January 3, 1939, he admitted that Hitler might "by an overwhelming air attack and vigorous submarine action crush Great Britain while she is yet unready". But it is quite obvious, on reading the three-page document, that this contingency—which he calls "remote"—had only been mentioned as a precaution. The real emphasis of the survey is in the opposite sense. "There is only one direction in which Herr Hitler with comparative ease could possess himself of many of the raw materials lacking to Germany", wrote the British Chargé d'Affaires, "and that is in the East, and consequently the agricultural and mineral resources of the Ukraine and even of Rumanian territory are the subject of much talk. It is in that direction that Germany appears most likely to break out." A little later, while admitting that war could not be avoided if Hitler willed it, he stressed that British intervention in German relations with the East of Europe was already being "hotly resented", and in any case Britain was powerless forcibly to arrest German action. Hence "it should be possible to keep out of war (i) by facing the issue clearly and in good time that we cannot guarantee the *status quo* in Central and Eastern Europe, and (ii) by exerting all our efforts to cultivate and maintain good relations with Field-Marshal Goering and the moderate Nazis, with a view to their exercising a restraining influence on the extremists".<sup>41</sup>

It was on the same date that von Dirksen, German Ambassador in London, in his annual review of the situation, was recording his opinion that "a further German penetration toward the Ukraine, whose conquest by Germany is firmly believed in Great Britain to be timed for the spring of 1939, would be accepted".<sup>42</sup> The following day he devoted almost an entire dispatch to this question. Dirksen noted in particular the interest of the British press in the Ukrainian question, which it always treated, he said, in connection with alleged German plans for expansion. "It is regarded here as fairly certain that Germany is playing with the idea of forming a Greater Ukrainian State and will sooner or later implement this aim"—although the newspapers stress that this would bring Germany into war not only with the Soviet Union but also with Poland, which "does not enjoy

<sup>40</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. III, p. 557.    <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 562-3.    <sup>42</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. IV, p. 362.

any great sympathy in Britain at present". The possibility of joint German-Polish action against the Soviet Union was "hardly considered", he said.

Dirksen was struck by the way in which the British newspapers (even the opposition press) refrained from any suggestion of British intervention in Eastern Europe: their reports from there showed great interest, but were "like those of an impartial observer". He mentioned in particular an article in the *Daily Telegraph* of December 19 "which simply states that the loss of the Ukraine would be a particularly severe blow for Russia", giving the reasons in detail. It was not by chance that Dirksen selected the *Daily Telegraph*: during the months before Munich it had printed many criticisms of Chamberlain's policy.

As for "authoritative circles", Dirksen considered it could be assumed that, "in accordance with the basic trend of Chamberlain's policy, they will accept a German expansionist policy in Eastern Europe. In this connection the Polish question recedes into the background as compared with the Ukrainian question. It is expected that the first move for a new order in Eastern Europe will arise out of the Ukrainian question, which would be tackled by Germany and brought to a head." But Dirksen warned his chiefs that the authoritative circles in Britain didn't want Germany to take "precipitate action without adequately preparing European public opinion"—otherwise France would be forced to intervene against an unprovoked attack by Germany, and this would have "inevitable repercussions". However, if "a Ukrainian State were to come into being with German help, even if it were of a military nature, under the psychologically skilful slogan freely circulated by Germany: 'Self-determination for the Ukrainians, liberation of the Ukraine from the domination of Bolshevik Jewry', this would be accepted by authoritative circles here and by British public opinion, especially if consideration for British economic interests in the development of the new State were an added inducement for the British".<sup>43</sup>

This careful analysis—with its last hint of British economic interest, parallel with the hint of similar interest in France, noted earlier—is particularly valuable because it coincides so closely with the line of thought transparently visible in the various British diplomatic papers and discussions quoted earlier. Dirksen's survey is in effect a summary of the successes won by German publicity and confidential discussion with the "authoritative circles" of Great Britain, so anxious to believe that what they would have liked to see happen was in fact approaching.

<sup>43</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. IV, pp. 365-7.



Of course similar successes had been won in France. There, too, the one thing that was not even given a moment's consideration was the possibility that the Soviet Union might have something to say about all these plans. On January 8, 1939, the French Ambassador at Rome told Lord Perth, the British Ambassador, that "he did not think that Colonel Beck would resist the German demands further as regards the Ukraine, though a condominium might for a time be established there". (The Ambassador also conveyed in all seriousness an observation which his Polish colleague had made to him that very day—"that as France and England had now disinterested themselves in Central Europe only two Great Powers remained there, namely Germany and Poland. It was therefore necessary for these two countries to come to an agreement.")<sup>44</sup>

On January 10, 1939, Chamberlain and Halifax stopped in Paris, on their way to Rome, for a talk with the French Premier and Foreign Minister. The main subject of discussion was the worsened relations between France and Italy, as the latter's victory in Spain grew more certain. But Chamberlain at once showed what was uppermost in his thoughts. He regretted the sudden change in the Italian attitude. "He wondered what was its true significance. Had it any connection with the project which Herr Hitler was said to have in his mind in regard to the Ukraine?" Bonnet thought this might very well be the case: "the design was to keep France occupied in the Mediterranean, thus leaving Germany free to attain her objective in Eastern Europe".<sup>45</sup>

Chamberlain returned to the subject in the course of conversations with Mussolini on the 12th. Armament was accelerating in Germany, and there was massing of troops. There was a "general suspicion", he said, that Hitler had in mind a further move in the near future which would "upset a great part of Europe". Some people thought it would be in the direction of the Ukraine, others that it would be preceded by a sudden attack in the West—"Here Signor Mussolini shook his head emphatically". Probably most people thought that the move, if made, would be towards the East, and feared a war between Germany and Poland, or Germany and Russia, or Germany with Poland and Russia combined. Chamberlain "would not say that such a war would necessarily involve Western Powers also, but once war began one never could tell when or where it would stop". Could Mussolini give any assurances to mitigate his anxiety?

Mussolini pondered a while, and then in his reply stated that (i) Hitler desired a long period of peace, (ii) he did not believe Hitler

<sup>44</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. III, p. 572.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 513.

intended to set up an independent Ukraine or to attempt the disruption of Russia, "although he, Mussolini, would not feel that it would be a bad thing if an independent Ukraine were created", (iii) in his view the stories about a move eastward by Germany were without foundation, invented by propagandists (he did not say which), (iv) "as to any idea of a German attack in the west, such a thing was absolutely out of the question"; the frontier there was already decided.

This reply served the purpose of Hitler very well. It diverted attention from the preparations for "liquidating the rest of Czechoslovakia", and from the question of a possible attack on Poland alone. At the same time it left the faintest shade of doubt that something might be attempted against the U.S.S.R. after all. And it did what Mussolini could to reassure the British Premier so far as an attack on Britain and France was concerned. Chamberlain, however, was not entirely reassured—and the direction which his anxieties took was again revealing. Germany, he said, was already so strong that no combination of Powers could attack her successfully: what did she want further armaments for? "Russia could not be an enemy to be feared by Germany, for she was far too weak internally to take the offensive, although she might put up a very good defence if she were attacked."

This was of course a gentle hint that, if Hitler nevertheless wanted to expand, the U.S.S.R. was after all the easiest target. Mussolini avoided the point, confining himself to asserting the purely defensive nature of Hitler's armaments and recounting how many enemies he had in the West. Chamberlain was still not satisfied with this, and the next evening (January 13), after dinner at the British Embassy, probed the matter further. He told Mussolini that he was not altogether convinced. He said it was a grave misapprehension to think that democracies would not fight "under certain circumstances", and it would be a terrible tragedy "if aggressive action were taken under a misapprehension as to what lengths the democracies might be prepared to go".<sup>46</sup>

The subject dropped after that: but Chamberlain had at any rate done what he could to clear up the "misapprehension". While Russia was "weak" internally, the Western democracies would fight against aggression "under certain circumstances". He was assuming, no doubt, that Hitler and Mussolini shared his and Bonnet's views (nurtured by such convincing reports from Moscow) about the relative strengths of the U.S.S.R. on the one hand and the British-French alliance on the other—and consequently would choose accordingly. There

<sup>46</sup> *D.B.F.P.*, vol. III, pp. 525-9.



remained, of course, to find out what were the "certain circumstances" in which the British and French Governments would fight. For this further discussions would be necessary.

In fact, however, these never took place, because suddenly the bottom dropped out of the whole "Ukrainian" scheme. At the beginning of January, Hitler had told Beck, during their interview at Berchtesgaden, that in his view the Ukrainian question was not "pressing" (Coulondre cabled from Berlin on March 14. The Polish minute says Hitler's expression was that "he was interested in the Ukraine from the economic viewpoint, but he had no interest in it politically").<sup>47</sup> News of this talk, however, did not percolate at once. Only on January 13 could Ogilvie-Forbes report to London that, according to the Polish Ambassador in Berlin whom he had seen that very morning, Hitler in his talk with Beck "scoffed at the report of intended German aggression in the Ukraine".<sup>48</sup> On January 14 (the day Chamberlain and Halifax left Rome) there reached London a report from Mr. Vereker, British Minister at the Embassy in Moscow, sent by him on the 10th: in this he discounted the press talk of a movement of revolt in the Soviet Ukraine, and declared that German conquest of the Ukraine from the outside would "present the greatest difficulties". Apart from the unlikeliness of Poland co-operating (for fear of losing her own large Ukrainian territories), Vereker pointed out the strength of the U.S.S.R., strategic and military, and disagreed emphatically with the remarks of the French military intelligence chief on December 6 (quoted earlier) about its "weakness". On the contrary, he thought "there would be much popular enthusiasm in the Soviet Union for a war against a Fascist aggressor", and this would be shared by the Ukrainian population, "which cannot retain pleasant recollections of the German occupation in 1918-19".<sup>49</sup> On January 16 there reached London from Paris the report of a conversation between the British air attaché there and the head of French air intelligence on the 10th. While the Frenchman was "certain that the next move would be towards the Ukraine", he thought it would be engineered step by step, but Poland stood in the way, and therefore she would fight. The U.S.S.R. would fight too. Hence, "if France and England took a firm line and refused to acquiesce in Germany's ambitions in the East, she would be faced with a serious war on two fronts and she would be beaten". Whereas "if France and England acquiesced, Germany would smash Poland, overrun Rumania, seize the Ukraine and

<sup>47</sup> French Yellow Book, p. 68; Polish White Book, p. 53.

<sup>48</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. III, p. 582.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 575-8.

be the unchallenged mistress of Europe and the world". The British officer suggested that, if Britain and France did take a strong line, "Hitler would draw back and not continue his designs on the Ukraine"; but the Frenchman thought he was too urgently pressed by home difficulties.<sup>50</sup>

All this was dispiriting enough for those who had pinned their hopes on a German march into Soviet Ukraine as the solution of many problems. It must have been still worse when on January 17 Mr. Strang, in summing up at the Foreign Office various reports on the Hitler-Beck interview, minuted that "as regards the Ukraine, our sources agree that nothing much seems to have been said". Moreover, there was evidence—both from these sources and from others—that Hitler was interested now in an attack in the West, rather than the East.<sup>51</sup>

However that might be, in his Reichstag speech on January 30 Hitler not only spoke of his desire to live at peace, and to trade, with all nations (specially mentioning Britain and France), but also, for the first time, did not attack the Soviet Union. And in talking of *Lebensraum*, he referred not to the Ukraine or to Eastern Europe, but to overseas colonies.

Thus, after over three months of hopes that he would "go east" to seek the riches of the Ukraine, the hopes proved barren. When they revived, later on, it was in very different circumstances. But they had served their purpose—for Hitler. He had convinced himself that, just as in the years 1933-8, just as in the months from March to September of the latter year, it was a powerful incentive for the British and French Governments to co-operate in his aggressions, and to agree to his breaches of treaties, if he raised before them the mirage of an anti-Soviet crusade.

### 5. Politicians

It cannot be said that the significance of the events after Munich was entirely lost upon members of the Tory majority governing Great Britain. The assassination of a German diplomat in Paris on November 7 by a young Jewish emigrant was followed by a carefully prepared pogrom against the Jews throughout Germany, involving the ferocious beating to death of men, women and children, and the destruction of property on a huge scale. No outrage of such dimensions against the Jews was known to history. This produced some admissions of disappointment by Ministers, as we have seen (Chapter

<sup>50</sup> D.B.F.P., vol. III, pp. 583-4.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp. 589-90.

XII). Nor was it without justification that the Polish Ambassador in London, in the dispatch to Warsaw already quoted, wrote on December 16: "Premier Chamberlain's assertion that a new era had come guaranteeing peace to 'our generation' is considered by all to be an illusion, which contact with reality is causing swiftly to fade away."<sup>52</sup>

But, as the Ambassador noted, this was not influencing Chamberlain himself (or his closest colleagues of the Inner Cabinet). His attitude was reflected in the statement of *The Times* diplomatic correspondent when the forthcoming visit of Chamberlain and Halifax was announced:

"In London it has been clearly realised during the past few weeks that the disposal of the Czechoslovak crisis and the signature of the Munich agreement marked a turning-point in the relations of Great Britain with the rest of Europe; and the end of the French alliance with Czechoslovakia could not fail to render the change even more decisive for France."

But it was not only in the foreign relations of Great Britain that this turning-point was marked, so far as the Government was concerned: it affected home policies as well.

Thus, at any other time a British Government would have reacted strongly to the type of attacks which Hitler began against opposition leaders, denouncing Duff Cooper and Eden in a speech at Saarbrücken on October 9, and Churchill and Greenwood in a speech at Weimar on November 5, as men whom it would be dangerous to see in the British Government. Later began attacks on orthodox Conservative leaders, such as Lord Baldwin (after he had deplored the Jewish pogroms of November 10). That there was a programme, and not chance, in the attacks on British politicians, was very well revealed by the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on October 30, when it wrote: "So long as Churchill and Lloyd George are permitted to broadcast agitation speeches to America and to disavow their own Government, we cannot believe that public opinion in England is ready for an agreement, and so long must we constantly reckon with the possibility of a turn to the line of Churchill and Eden. The Italians have ascertained the same thing with regard to France. Any further progress has as a precondition the final clarification of the internal situation in England and France."

These outbursts produced no protests from Chamberlain. On the

<sup>52</sup> *D. & M.*, vol. I, p. 294. Lord Halifax told the German Ambassador, the same day privately, that he "had been a good deal disappointed by the deterioration in the situation since Munich" (*D.B.F.P.*, vol. III, p. 434).

contrary. In the House of Commons on November 1 (the day before he proposed ratification of the Anglo-Italian agreement) he compared the critics of Munich to a bird "fouling its own nest". On November 9, at the Lord Mayor's annual banquet, he proclaimed that "Europe is settling down to a more peaceful state". When the Italian Fascists began the campaign for Corsica, Nice and Tunis, heralded by the anti-French scene on November 30 in the Italian Chamber, Chamberlain was asked in the House of Commons whether any treaty, pact or agreed understanding ensured that Britain would render military aid to France in the event of an attack by Italy. He replied coldly (December 12): "No such specific requirement exists"—deploring, in a further reply, not the demands of the Italians themselves, but the demonstrations in which they had been put forward.

A great volume of protest, in Great Britain and France,<sup>53</sup> induced the Prime Minister to change his attitude in subsequent statements, and to declare more specifically against the Italian claim to Tunis. This does not alter the fact that the immediate reaction of the British Government was so automatically to apply the principles of Munich that, for an instant, the world saw France in the position of Czechoslovakia, and was already beginning to look round for Lord Runciman.

Much excitement was aroused when the German Ambassador stayed away, with his staff, from the Foreign Press Association's anniversary dinner on December 13 on account of a very mild expression of regret in Chamberlain's speech (circulated beforehand) that there had been attacks in Germany on a man like Lord Baldwin. What attracted much less attention—although far more important—was Chamberlain's declaration that critics of Munich were rendering "no service to democracy or to the chances of further international co-operation" and—one month after the Nazi pogroms against the Jews—that he found it difficult "to rouse much excitement over different systems of government, apart from particular actions which may not necessarily be inherent in the system".

Other examples of this kind could be quoted: nor must the arrangements be overlooked which began at the end of January, 1939, to prepare for an Anglo-German economic agreement by reciprocal visits between British and German trade Ministers, beginning in the middle of March, and of simultaneous talks between British and German industrialists. In these preliminary arrangements, as the records

<sup>53</sup> Even Bonnet asked for some reassuring phrase to be put into the speech which the Prime Minister was to deliver at the Foreign Press Association the next day—and was refused! (*D.B.F.P.*, vol. III, pp. 425-6.)



show, the British side was the one pressing for meetings, while the Germans, conscious of the situation in Britain, were adopting a pose of superiority and reserve.<sup>54</sup>

Every effort was made in Britain to suppress criticism of Germany in the newspapers. As Wickham Steed, a former editor of *The Times*, pointed out shortly after Munich, the Saarbrücken speech by Hitler on October 9, to which reference has already been made, aroused general indignation in Great Britain when the news of it was broadcast the same evening. But "of the depths of the wrath hardly a hint was given next morning in the leading British newspapers". The reason was that "certain large advertising agents" had warned them that advertisements yielding large revenue would be withheld if they "played up" the international crisis, which would be "bad for trade". During the whole of September numerous "hints" and "suggestions" from Government sources were used to direct the British press, conveyed "confidentially" along lines which would be acceptable to the Government.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, it was revealed by the Prime Minister on December 1, after much turning and twisting, that, through the agency of the United States Ambassador, the Government had secured the deletion from American-owned films of sections containing talks by leading British journalists hostile to the National Government.

On the other hand, all the resources of the press subservient to the Government were mobilised to consolidate the "victory" gained at Munich. The following are characteristic examples:

On October 17 *The Times* wrote that "any conceivable form of appeasement in Europe" must necessarily acknowledge the "peculiar interest (of Germany) as an industrial power in the agricultural and other markets of Central and Eastern Europe". On the 19th it printed a long article, in possibly the most prominent place in the newspaper, in which the Aga Khan told Germany that Danzig would "probably come under direct Reich administration", that a similar fate "probably" awaited Memel, that there were "spheres where, for geographical and natural reasons, Germany will be the dominating economic factor" and that the four Powers—Britain, France, Germany and Italy—ought to guarantee "one another's frontiers and colonies". His Highness did not explain what frontiers they ought *not* to guarantee; but this was cleared up after a letter to the editor—from one of his own leader-writers, and given equal prominence with the Aga Khan's

<sup>54</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. IV, pp. 396-426.

<sup>55</sup> Wickham Steed, *The Press* (October, 1938), pp. 249-50. One example of this was given above, on p. 215).

article—in which the latter was respectfully criticised because Hitler's *Mein Kampf* had not been amended in such a way as to encourage confidence in France (October 20). Nothing had been done, wrote another correspondent, "to suggest that a France which ceased to encircle and oppose Germany in the East would still have to be destroyed". Of course, he said, it might well be that Hitler "still has his eye on the Ukraine or other parts of Soviet Russia", but his mind might be working in another direction.

Lest there should be any doubt as to the inference which *The Times* itself wished to be drawn from this correspondence, it printed, on the same day as the second letter just mentioned (October 24), an editorial welcoming the "costly failure" of the French system of interlocked alliances beyond Germany's eastern frontier, and explaining that "there are many who hold that both the security of France and the peace of Europe will be better served by such a policy (a general settlement with Germany and Italy) than by any attempt to hold Germany in check by building up counter-forces on her eastern frontier".

Anticipating somewhat, it is worth noting that by November 23 *The Times* no longer felt it necessary to attribute to "many" the view that France's pacts of mutual assistance against aggression were "an artificial system of equilibrium". It said that the breakdown of what it called, in terms borrowed directly from the vocabulary of the German Propaganda Ministry, "the policy of encirclement", made it much easier for Britain and France to pursue a common policy.

On October 25, *The Times* ventured out into the open with an extraordinary article on Soviet industry, explaining that the U.S.S.R. was "prostrate", that the planning system had "broken down", that the situation of Soviet agriculture, timber industry, coalmining, iron-working, steel manufacture and cotton textiles was worse than before the war. Above all, in a revealing "aside", *The Times* informed any prospective occupier of this shamefully neglected territory that, "if the Union were engaged in a major war, agriculture would very soon be paralysed".

Making assurance doubly sure, the paper the next day, in the course of an editorial on the situation in China, pointed out to Japan that, while there was no reason to suppose that China would "discontinue organised resistance", the alleged "completely passive attitude adopted by the U.S.S.R. in these days" made it "tolerably clear" that the Far Eastern Red Army was really incapable of meeting the Japanese army in combat. It might be mentioned in passing that this was not the



only editorial, by any means, in which *The Times*, in the course of 1938, lamented bitterly the obstinacy of the Japanese in persisting in an attack on China which only brought quarrels with her "former friends" (November 29), and weakened her for her professed aims of combating Bolshevism.

It would be most unfair, of course, to suggest that *The Times* had the monopoly of this amiable theory that Europe's troubles could be alleviated if the aggressor Powers, and particularly Germany and Japan, would only turn their attention to the U.S.S.R. Thus Sir Eric Teichman, for many years a British diplomat in China, wrote an article which was given considerable prominence in the *Sunday Times* of October 30, in which he, too, warned the Japanese that they, "who claim to be the bulwark guarding the Far East against the Soviet tide, may end by driving China's millions into the Russian fold"—a prospect which was "very grim", unless the leaders of Japan would call the whole business off.

Again, another friend of the Prime Minister's, Lord Elton, in an article printed by the same *Sunday Times* (November 27), congratulated his leader on the conversations with the French Government and the negotiations for a Franco-German declaration similar to that of Hitler and Chamberlain, on the grounds that the policy of encirclement had "collapsed", and that France had returned to a "realistic" policy. British permanent interest in Europe was "the defence of the West", proclaimed Lord Elton.

As though to confirm this point of view, Lord Halifax received the Soviet Ambassador for the first time since Munich—nearly four months—only on January 27, 1939: and then at the Ambassador's own request, to discuss the Aaland Islands.

The climax of the campaign for confidence in Germany was reached on the very eve of Hitler's annexation of Czechoslovakia. On March 9 in the lobbies of the House of Commons, Chamberlain gave another of his anonymous talks, to be published as from "authoritative quarters". On March 10 the world learned from the British press that these "quarters" considered that the international situation "is less anxious and arouses less concern over possible unpleasant developments than it has done for some time" (*Manchester Guardian*), and were "optimistic about the international situation for the first time for many months" (*Daily Express*); "an agreement to limit arms may be possible before the year is out" (*ibid.*). That evening, in a speech at Chelsea, Sir Samuel Hoare announced that the greatest "opportunity to discover the road to peace" in world history now existed.

"Co-operation between five men—the three Dictators and the Prime Ministers of Britain and France—might create a Utopia in Europe in an increasingly short space of time."

In France, Government policy followed the same broad trend. Almost at the beginning of the preliminary negotiations for the visit of Ribbentrop to Paris and the Franco-German declaration of December 6, lasting over six weeks, Bonnet assured the German Ambassador that the Government's policy was one of "building up a front against those elements hostile to an understanding" and of "suppressing and excluding the Communists".<sup>56</sup> This was a reference to Daladier's speech at the Radical-Socialist Congress at Marseilles on October 27, three days before, which had violently attacked the Communists for their attitude over Munich. Daladier thereby had indicated that the Radical-Socialist party intended to break up the People's Front formed to combat Fascism in 1936. In fulfilment of this policy, Bonnet used the most flagrant official pressure to prevent the French newspapers "writing up" the outrages against the Jews in the second week of November, and even to restrain its descriptions of the anti-French demonstrations in the Italian Chamber at the end of the month.<sup>57</sup> In the meantime, on November 12, Daladier (who had secured extraordinary powers from the Chamber after Munich) issued a series of decree-laws abolishing the five-day week of eight hours a day and legalising compulsory overtime—thus sweeping away the basic social achievement of the People's Front. A one-day General Strike of protest on November 30, in which two-and-a-half to three million workers participated, was treated as an "insurrection" by the Government. It "requisitioned" the railwaymen, concentrated tanks and called up reservists; and there were thousands of strikers victimised, with Government approval. Even anti-Semitism received its official encouragement: at the Premier's reception when Ribbentrop came to Paris on December 6, the two Jewish members of the Government, the Ministers of Colonies and Education, were not invited. As late as January 26, the French Ambassador in Berlin was telling the Germans "that he had succeeded, partly through the Quai d'Orsay and partly by direct contact with journalists and editors of his acquaintance, in keeping the French press and the Strasbourg broadcasting station in order".<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. IV, pp. 443-4.

<sup>57</sup> A description of the processes used for this purpose, by one who knew the under-side of the French press world very well, is given by Werth, *op. cit.*, pp. 380-3. He also gives instances of persecution of foreign correspondents (pp. 392-3).

<sup>58</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. IV, p. 492.



Meanwhile, discussions for closer Franco-German commercial relations, begun while Ribbentrop was in Paris by a detailed exchange of views between economic advisers of the two Governments,<sup>59</sup> were pushed ahead, with a view to meetings between French and German industrialists after the latter's conference with a delegation of the Federation of British Industries, i.e. in the second half of March. A far-reaching programme of these discussions, covering close co-operation in a variety of capital development schemes both in Europe and in colonial territories, was submitted by the French Embassy in Berlin on March 11.<sup>60</sup>

Thus the M.P.s, newspapers and big business of Britain and France were being harnessed into the operation of building a new order based on Munich (so far as lay within the powers of their respective Governments) when Hitler sent his armies into Czechoslovakia.

It is not surprising that Stalin's speech of Friday, March 10, 1939, at the opening of the 18th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—which reached the French and British newspapers in ample time for the Saturday afternoon and Sunday newspapers—was almost completely suppressed by them, or heavily overlaid with the "sunshine talk" emanating from the two Governments (such a careful observer as Werth, basing his narrative mainly on the press, does not even mention the speech). For Stalin not only cruelly analysed and exposed the policy of "non-intervention" and encouraging aggressors for what it was, but warned the world that a new imperialist war was already in progress since 1935, and had already involved over 500 million people in Ethiopia, Spain, China, Austria and Czechoslovakia. He went on:

"The war has created a new situation with regard to the relations between countries. It has enveloped them in an atmosphere of alarm and uncertainty. By undermining the basis of the postwar peace régime and overriding the elementary principles of international law, it has cast doubt on the value of international treaties and obligations. Pacifism and disarmament schemes are dead and buried. Feverish arming has taken their place. Everybody is arming, small States and big States, including primarily those which practise the policy of non-intervention. Nobody believes any longer in the unctuous speeches which claim that the Munich concessions to the aggressors and the Munich agreement opened a new era of 'appeasement'. They are disbelieved even by the signatories to the Munich agreement, Britain

<sup>59</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. IV, pp. 477-81.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 510-13.

and France, who are increasing their armaments no less than other countries."<sup>61</sup>

This strong and merciless realism was the exact opposite of the "sunshine" propaganda which was being spread far and wide in London and Paris at the same moment. Yet it was the truth, while the propaganda was nothing but lies. That is why it had to be suppressed. But four days later events justified Stalin fully, and exposed the propaganda of Chamberlain and Bonnet.

### 6. The Peoples

It would be wrong to suppose that these events took everyone by surprise. The highly secret development of the Munich conspiracy by the diplomats, politicians, businessmen and generals of the four Powers which signed the agreement of September 30 did not prevent those who had seen through Munich from understanding what was going on.

The day after Munich, Maurice Thorez, general secretary of the French Communist Party, declared that Chamberlain's talk of peace for a generation was "an abominable lie", and that "Munich meant war".<sup>62</sup> After hearing Bonnet justifying Munich, at the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Chamber, Gabriel Péri—foreign editor of *Humanité*, shot by the Germans on December 15, 1941—said: "These blackguards are leading the country to a catastrophe!"<sup>63</sup> Along these lines the French Communists continued their fight—pointing out, for example, that "Munich and the decrees (abolishing the forty-hour week) are inseparable".<sup>64</sup> They organised a demonstration of protest on the arrival of Chamberlain and Halifax in Paris on November 23, and exposed the collaboration with Mussolini which was putting French territory itself in danger.<sup>65</sup> The majority of the trade union rank and file sympathised with them: the fact that over two-and-a-half millions struck in very adverse conditions on November 30—an action which Ministerial speeches, hundreds of newspapers and the French radio told them was support for the Communists—was an outstanding confirmation. But for that very reason all sections of bourgeois opinion—from the extreme Right to the vast majority of the Socialist Party's M.P.s and higher officials—were united against them. Only a handful of courageous individuals—the Right-wing

<sup>61</sup> Full text in Stalin, *Problems of Leninism* (English edition, Moscow, 1953), pp. 756-7.

<sup>62</sup> Florimond Bonte, *Le Chemin d'Honneur* (Paris, 1949), p. 251.

<sup>63</sup> Fernand Grenier, *France d'hier, d'aujourd'hui, de demain* (London, 1943), p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Werth, *op. cit.*, p. 376.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 395, 405-6.



Nationalist Kérellis and some other M.P.s and journalists among them—ventured to denounce the policy of the Munichites. Few as they were, they were sufficient to cause concern to the German Ambassador. On November 25 he reported that “in the press and in political circles opposition to the Daladier-Bonnet policy is growing. It is seen very strongly in its clear co-operation with the British opposition to Chamberlain and Halifax . . . who are severely criticised by all papers of the Left and also by papers of the Right such as *Époque*” (Kérellis’ paper). But the “main opposition”, he said, was against the proposed Franco-German declaration. On December 28 he repeated that there were elements of the Right, as well as of the “Marxist Left”, carrying on an offensive against the Munich Agreement. On February 18, when he protested against Bonnet publicly talking about France extending her friendships in Eastern and Central Europe, Bonnet pleaded that “the warmongers” would gain the upper hand in the Chamber if he did not. They were already reproaching him with attributing greater importance to the Franco-German agreement (of December 6) than was done in Germany.<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless, Bonnet’s great asset was the Socialist Party’s support of Munich. In the absence of a united working-class opposition, the other elements disgusted with Munich were powerless.

In the speech at the British Communist Party’s Congress which was quoted earlier, R. P. Dutt (enlarging on the point made earlier by Harry Pollitt) had said on September 18, 1938, that the British Government was deliberately creating a war atmosphere. The war crisis was real enough, but Chamberlain was using it to stage a deception—“that to-morrow we may find Britain, France and the Soviet Union at war with Germany”—and if possible to destroy the Peace Front idea by associating it with the idea of war. He continued:

“If Chamberlain wins, if he succeeds in breaking the Peace Front by putting forward his policy as the triumph of peace, then, when the bells of peace are ringing over his victory, the real menace begins. If Chamberlain’s policy, which will be celebrated as a policy of peace, goes through, then Fascism, enormously strengthened in Europe, will at last be able to turn its forces upon the democracies, and the British people will then have to fight all the same, but under immeasurably worse conditions.”<sup>67</sup>

These prophetic words were reinforced by the Communist Party’s declaration, on October 1, that at Munich “the peace of the world

<sup>66</sup> D.G.F.P., vol. IV, pp. 464, 485, 497-8.

<sup>67</sup> Passage reproduced in *Labour Monthly* (London), November, 1938.

has not been saved. It has been betrayed to the custody of Hitler, to be broken when he considers the time favourable for his next act of conquest, with his military forces enormously strengthened by his invasion of Czechoslovakia. . . . If the Munich Agreement is not repudiated, ask yourself the question: ‘Which country in Europe will be the next to be attacked?’” Proposing various measures of popular pressure to secure a single front of progressive forces, opposed to Chamberlain in Britain, and make certain of the world conference proposed by Litvinov, the declaration underlined: “The Four-Power Pact of Hitler and Chamberlain, of Mussolini and Daladier, is directed against your future interests even more than it is against the people of Czechoslovakia now.”<sup>68</sup>

This policy, preached in the *Daily Worker*, the factories and trade unions, found an echo in scores of local Labour Parties which began pressing for such progressive unity: but also in a wider public still. In five by-elections after Munich, held between October and December, the Government vote increased only from 123,000 (at the 1935 General Election) to 124,000, whereas the anti-Government vote went up from 99,000 to 131,000. In two of these contests, Oxford and Bridgwater, Independent Progressive candidates fought on a People’s Front basis: so did the Labour candidate in a third, Dartford. Thirty-nine Labour M.P.s supported the People’s Front candidate who won Bridgwater—against Labour Party Executive wishes. In January, 1939, a leading member of that Executive, Stafford Cripps, laid a policy statement for progressive unity on foreign and home policy before his colleagues. When they rejected it by 17 to 3, he circulated it to the local Labour Parties. For this he was expelled—yet by mid-March, i.e. when Hitler seized Czechoslovakia, 79 divisional (i.e. constituency) parties and 163 local parties had endorsed the memorandum, while another 27 divisional and 60 local parties had protested against his expulsion.<sup>69</sup>

In the meantime, minority groups in the capitalist class were responding to the campaign. One most arresting example was the League of Nations Union meeting at Chingford on December 9. Here, on the platform, were independent Conservatives, Liberals, the Labour M.P. Arthur Henderson and other Labour Party members, and the local secretary of the Communist Party—to hear Winston Churchill call for a foreign policy “to gather together all the forces

<sup>68</sup> Report of the Central Committee of the 16th Party Congress (Communist Party of Great Britain), pp. 36-7.

<sup>69</sup> *Labour Monthly*, April, 1939, pp. 209 (editorial), 230-5 (article by Allen Hutt).



of resistance to the aggression of dictators and to make a common cause with other like-minded nations", and for "a real National Government, one embracing all the forces in the country which make for its strength, its safety and its survival".<sup>70</sup> Other occasions, less vivid but no less significant, could be found in other parts of the country. There can be no question but that a vast mass of disgusted opposition to Munich and to the policy behind it was in existence.

But in British political conditions the organisation of such an opposition depended for its success upon the Labour Party, as basically the parliamentary representative body of the trade unions. The different elements of opposition had not the opportunity, or means of publicity, to build up another machinery of co-operation in time. And the leaders of the main trade unions and of the Labour Party, in their great majority, rejected such a responsibility, not only expelling Cripps but threatening to dissolve local Labour Parties which supported him. They did so because, as we have seen earlier, they had in principle supported the policy of Chamberlain—though leaving him and the Tories with the responsibility for Munich when it came to the vote. They proved themselves (not for the first time and not for the last) an asset to Chamberlain rather than an obstacle.

Thus kindred difficulties prevented, in Britain and in France, the true issues being put before the mass of the people after Munich, and left the opposition weak and insufficiently organised. Yet on March 15, 1939, Hitler proved that they had been right.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in *Labour Monthly*, January, 1939, p. 17.

## EPILOGUE

"I DO not know whether your countries will benefit from this decision taken at Munich, but certainly we shall not be the last. After us, others will meet with the same fate." These were the words with which the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister, on September 30, 1938, closed the interview with the French, British and Italian Ministers in which he told them that his Government was accepting the decision taken against Czechoslovakia at Munich.<sup>1</sup>

On March 15, 1939, Gauleiter Streicher addressed a great demonstration at Nuremberg to celebrate the entry of German armies into Bohemia. He said (reported the French Consul at that city next day): "This is only a beginning: much more considerable events will follow. The democracies can rear up as much as they like, they will succumb in the end."<sup>2</sup>

In fact, on May 23, 1939, Hitler held a decisive conference with many high officers, including Goering, Keitel and Raeder, in which he announced that, in order to expand Germany's living space in the East ("Danzig is not the subject of the dispute at all"), Poland was to be attacked at the earliest opportunity. And he went on: "We cannot expect a repetition of the Czech affair. There will be war."<sup>3</sup>

And there was war. Yet, as we have seen both Hitler and Jodl noting, it was the seizure of Czechoslovakia which "laid the basis of action against Poland", and created "more or less favourable strategic premises" for attacking her. But the seizure of Czechoslovakia in March, 1939, was made possible by forcing her to surrender her fortified frontiers to Nazi Germany in September, 1938. That too we have seen. "It was with Munich that World War II began", Beneš said in a B.B.C. broadcast on August 8, 1942.<sup>4</sup>

By March, 1939, said the Judgment of the International Military Tribunal on September 30, 1946, sixteen years to the very day after Munich, "the time had now come for the German leaders to consider further acts of aggression". The accomplishment of the programme which Hitler had discussed with his closest associates on November 5, 1937, had made these further acts "more possible of attainment".<sup>5</sup> The first step in the accomplishment was Munich.

So much must be clear. Those who to-day defend Munich are

<sup>1</sup> *D. & M.*, vol. I, p. 270.

<sup>2</sup> *French Yellow Book*, p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> *Trial*, part II, p. 71.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 209.

<sup>5</sup> *Judgment of the International Military Tribunal*, London, H.M. Stationery Office), p. 22.

defending Hitler's whole programme of aggression and his launching of the second world war. But there is much else that emerges from the study of the causes and consequences of Munich.

Who provided the funds which put Hitler in power? Whose works provided the arms and the ammunitions for his armies, the cement and steel for his fortifications, the planes for his air force? Who organised the economic exploitation of his tributary lands in Central Europe and the Balkans? Who would have made profits from the *Lebensraum* which he was hoping to keep in Czechoslovakia, in Austria, in Poland and in the Soviet Union? The answer to all these questions is one and the same: German finance-capital, the great banking, industrial and commercial monopolies. But these were the very forces which had stood behind Kaiser Wilhelm II, in preparing and waging the first world war? Quite so. These were the forces which the Allies had saved from "Bolshevism" in 1918-19—and which now had turned against them. Munich was the final stage before these forces launched their war of revenge, with Hitler as their paladin. They had not been rooted out after their first try: now they would have their second.

Secondly. Why had they not been rooted out? Why were they given, on the contrary, repeated injections of lifegiving resources—the Dawes Plan, the American credits which followed, the foreign investments, the great renewal of short-term credits when Hitler came to power—until, with that, they could begin building up a massive war machine for themselves? Why, during the years before Hitler, did the Western Powers wink at the "secret" training and armament of military cadres in Germany? Why the long series of so-called "capitulations" to them, on political questions, in the years from 1933 to 1938? The evidence is massive and consistent. These were not capitulations at all, but more and more far-reaching gambles in an unspoken, tacit conspiracy—unspoken, that is, so far as the British and French Governments were concerned—until Munich, when it became spoken, and set out in black and white. The conspiracy was to make Hitlerite Germany (and its allies) the formidable engine of assault on the Soviet Union, an assault in which the British, French, Italian, Japanese and United States finance-capital had failed in 1918-22. Implacable, unforgetting hatred of the Soviet Union, not "cowardly surrender to Hitler", was the second active component of Munich. Of course at every stage there were doubts, hesitations and divisions among the henchmen of finance-capital—the politicians and the newspaper owners—but the decisions were made ultimately by the strongest groups: and the significance of those decisions was always the same.

Thirdly. Why did the peoples not see through these policies? Why did the democratic politicians, the liberal-minded newspapers, the Socialist and trade union militants, not rise up in revolt against them? Because—in both camps, the Nazi side and the Western imperialist side—of the tactics of diplomatic camouflage, of lying to the people, of thinking out specious excuses for action on each occasion which had no connection with the real reason: because of those "improvisations" which we heard Hitler's interpreter describing at Nuremberg. In this way step after step, although in reality logically linked in policy with what came before and after, seemed to be detached and to stand by itself. The study of Munich—that is, of a six months' period in the diplomatic and political intrigue of rival imperialisms, against the background of the events since 1917, and in a period of world history when one-sixth of the world was already Socialist and the labouring classes elsewhere had begun to take an interest in vital international questions—is a case-history of the swindling of man by man, and most particularly of the vast majority of working mankind by the tiny minority which exploits it. The mass of the people in the countries of capitalism was too sincere, too good-hearted itself in its desire for peace, to conceive of the lengths of deception to which imperialist diplomacy can go—and, in those where the capitalists ruled by Fascist methods, it had no means of expressing its protest.

Yet there were men and women in Britain and France as well as in Czechoslovakia, as has been shown, who not only understood the real trend of events but struggled to point it out to their fellow-citizens, and first of all to the working class on whom modern society, in the long run, depends. Why were they not successful? Very simply: because they were too few. The labour movement in these countries was in the hands of people who accepted the policy which led up to Munich and was consummated at Munich: for whom solidarity with the capitalists of their country came, in the long run, before peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union. Above all, they preferred to keep the labour movement divided—and thereby to prevent the forming of a movement of resistance to Hitler even wider than the working class—rather than unite it by joining hands with the Communists, to thwart their rulers' dream of sending someone (the Germans, the Japanese, anyone who seemed to be offering themselves) against the U.S.S.R.

These brief deductions stand out from a study of Munich and the way it was brought about. They are important, because the circumstances which lead to them did not end when the Munich "settlement" ended, on March 15, 1939.



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